

CHAPTER 2

ANCIENT INDIA

Chapter Outline and Focus Questions

2-1 *The Emergence of Civilization in India: The Indus Valley Society*

Q What were the chief features of the Indus Valley civilization, and in what ways was it similar to the civilizations that arose in Egypt and Mesopotamia?

2-2 *The Aryans in India*

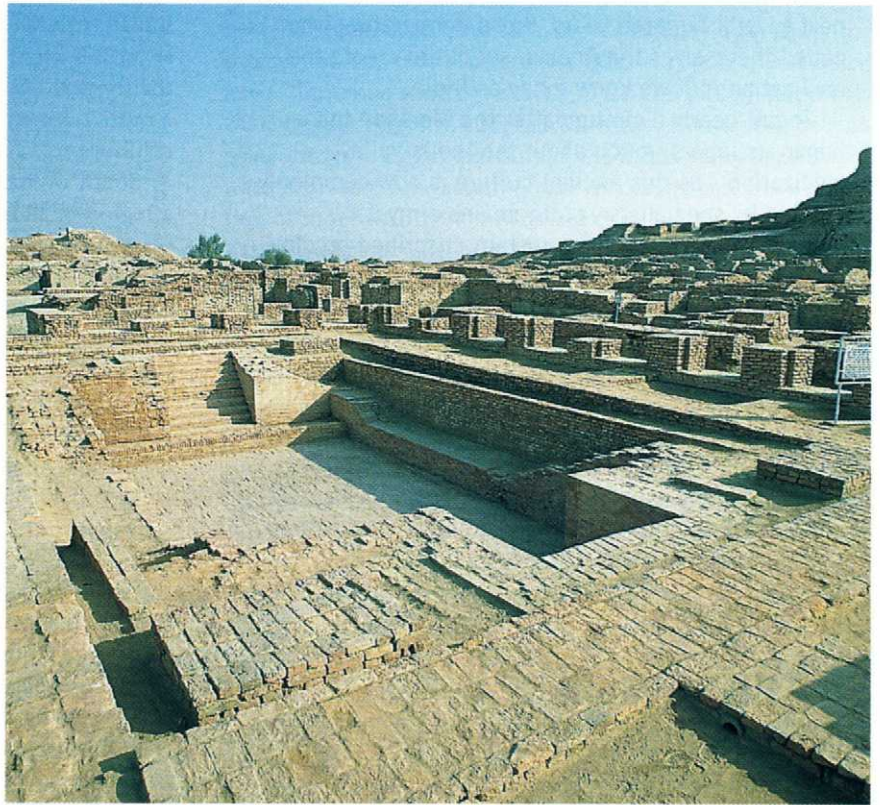
Q What were some of the distinctive features of the class system introduced by the Aryan peoples, and what effects did it have on Indian civilization?

2-3 *Escaping the Wheel of Life: The Religious World of Ancient India*

Q What are the main tenets of Brahmanism and Buddhism? How did they differ, and how did each religion influence Indian civilization?

2-4 *The Exuberant World of Indian Culture*

Q In what ways did the culture of ancient India resemble and differ from the cultural experience of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt?



Mohenjo-Daro: Ancient city on the Indus. William J. Duiker

Critical Thinking

Q What role did geography and the local environment play in affecting the nature of the first civilization that developed in the South Asian subcontinent? In what ways were these factors different from those that affected the civilizations discussed in Chapter 1?

Connections to Today

Q How would you compare the class system in ancient India as described in the Law of Manu with that of the United States at the present time? What do you think accounts for the differences?

IN THE EARLY 1920S, an archaeological team led by the British colonial official John Marshall uncovered the remains of an ancient city that had been buried

under the silt of the Indus River for over three thousand years. Suddenly, the fabled civilizations in Mesopotamia and the Nile River Valley (see Chapter 1) had a contemporary equivalent far to the east on the edge of the Indian subcontinent. As excavations continued, diggers at the site discovered the skeletal remains of several human beings caught in positions of sudden flight, provoking the assumption that the ancient city—now dubbed Mohenjo-Daro, or “City of the Dead”—had come to an abrupt end as the result of an invasion by nomadic peoples who began arriving in the regions about 1500 BCE. Over the next several hundred years, these immigrants, who called themselves the Aryans, set out to create the civilization that we know today as India.

Today, nearly a century after the Marshall team began its labors, much about the Indus Valley civilization—as this ancient culture is now commonly labeled by specialists—still remains a mystery, mainly because its writing system, inscribed on clay seals and tablets found at various sites in the region, remains undeciphered, and the connections between it and the later culture that developed in the Indian subcontinent under the Aryans remain in dispute among historians (see *Historians Debate “Who Were the Aryans?”* on p. 42). Nevertheless, many scholars today agree with John Marshall’s conclusion at the time that many aspects of this long dead civilization still persist among the peoples, cultures, and values of the Indian people today.

2-1 THE EMERGENCE OF CIVILIZATION IN INDIA: THE INDUS VALLEY SOCIETY



Focus Question: What were the chief features of Indus Valley civilization, and in what ways was it similar to the civilizations that arose in Egypt and Mesopotamia?

Like the civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt, the earliest civilizations in India arose in river valleys and were shaped, in part, by their environment. Thus, from its beginnings, Indian civilization has been intimately associated with the geography of the subcontinent.

2-1a A Land of Diversity

India was and still is a land of diversity. This diversity is evident in its languages and cultures as well as in its physical characteristics. India possesses an incredible array of languages. It has a deserved reputation, along with the Middle East, as a cradle of religion. Two of the world’s major religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, originated in India, and a number of others,

including Sikhism and Islam (the latter of which entered the South Asian subcontinent in the ninth or tenth century CE), continue to flourish there.

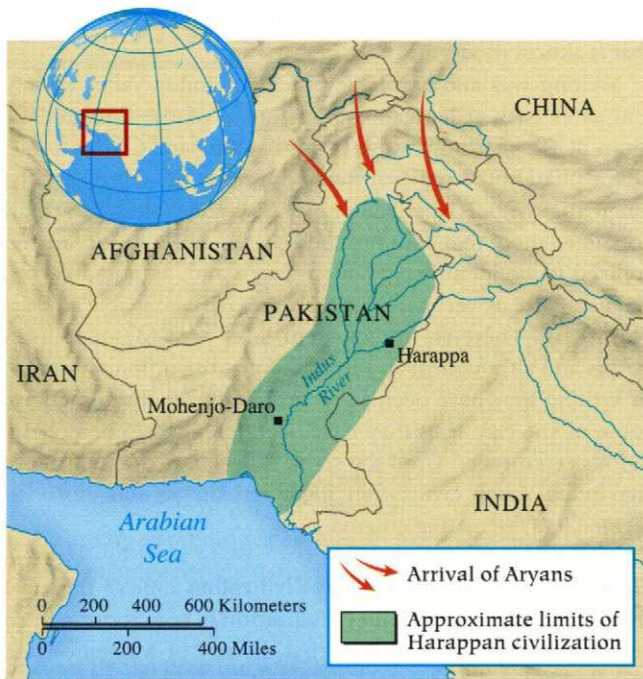
In its size and geographical complexity, India seems more like a continent than a nation. That complexity begins with the physical environment. The Indian subcontinent, shaped like a spade hanging from the southern ridge of Asia, is composed of a number of core regions. In the far north are the Himalayan and Karakoram mountain ranges, home of the highest peaks in the world. Directly to the south of the Himalayas and the Karakoram range is the rich valley of the Ganges, India’s “holy river” and one of the core regions of Indian culture. To the west is the Indus River valley. Today, the latter is a relatively arid plateau that forms the backbone of the modern state of Pakistan, but in ancient times it enjoyed a more temperate climate and served as the cradle of Indian civilization.

South of India’s two major river valleys lies the Deccan, a region of hills and an upland plateau that extends from the Ganges Valley to the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent. The interior of the plateau is relatively hilly and dry, but the eastern and western coasts are occupied by lush plains, which have historically been among the most densely populated regions of India. Off the southeastern coast is the island known today as Sri Lanka. Although Sri Lanka is now a separate country quite distinct politically and culturally from India, the island’s history is intimately linked with that of its larger neighbor.

In this vast region live a rich mixture of peoples: people speaking one of the languages in the Dravidian family, who may have descended from the Indus River culture that flourished at the dawn of Indian civilization more than four thousand years ago; Aryans, descended from the pastoral peoples who flooded southward from Central Asia in the second millennium BCE; and hill peoples, who may be the descendants of the first migrants passing through the area and hence may have been the earliest inhabitants of all. Although today this beautiful mosaic of peoples and cultures has been broken up into a number of separate independent states, the region still possesses a coherent history that is recognizably Indian.

2-1b The Indus Valley Civilization: A Fascinating Enigma

The first signs that an ancient civilization had emerged in the Indus River Valley appeared in the early nineteenth century, when archaeologists discovered the remains of an urban settlement at Harappa, a town located several hundred miles north of the site at Mohenjo-Daro. Today over one thousand small agricultural settlements have been unearthed in the region, many of them dating back to over nine thousand years ago. Those small mudbrick villages eventually gave rise to the sophisticated human communities that historians call Indus Valley civilization. Although today the area is relatively arid, during the third and fourth millennia BCE, it evidently received much more abundant rainfall, and the valleys of the Indus River and its tributaries supported a thriving civilization that may have covered a total area of more



Map 2.1 Ancient Indus Valley Civilization. This map shows the location of the first civilization that arose in the Indus River valley, which today is located in Pakistan.

Q Based on this map, why do you think the Indus Valley civilization resembled the civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt?

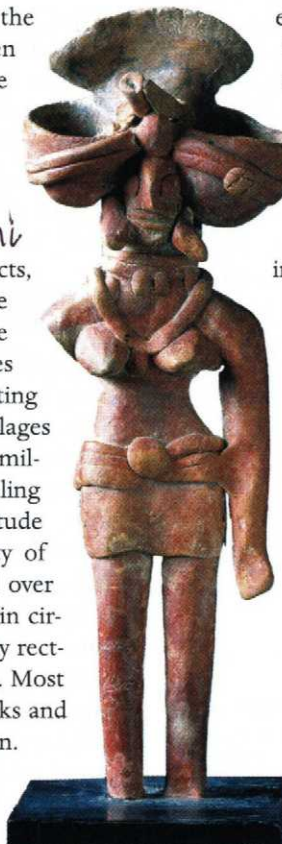
than 700,000 square miles, from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean. More than seventy sites have been unearthed since the area was discovered in the 1850s, but the main sites are at the two major cities, Harappa, in the Punjab, and Mohenjo-Daro, nearly 400 miles to the south near the mouth of the Indus River (see Map 2.1).

Political and Social Structures In several respects, the Indus Valley civilization closely resembled the cultures of Mesopotamia and the Nile Valley. Like them, it probably began in tiny farming villages scattered throughout the river valley, some dating back to as early as 6500 or 7000 BCE. These villages thrived and grew until by the middle of the third millennium BCE they could support a privileged ruling elite living in walled cities of considerable magnitude and affluence. The center of power was the city of Harappa, which was surrounded by a brick wall over 40 feet thick at its base and more than 3.5 miles in circumference. The city was laid out on an essentially rectangular grid, with some streets as wide as 30 feet. Most buildings were constructed of kiln-dried mudbricks and were square in shape, reflecting the grid pattern. At its height, the city may have had as many as 80,000 inhabitants, making it as large as some of the most populous Sumerian urban centers.

Both Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were divided into large walled neighborhoods, with narrow lanes separating the rows of houses. Houses varied in size, with some as high as three stories, but all followed the same general plan based on a square courtyard surrounded by rooms. Bathrooms featured an advanced drainage system, which carried wastewater out to drains located under the streets and thence to sewage pits beyond the city walls. But the cities also had the equivalent of the modern slum. At Harappa, tiny dwellings for workers have been found near metal furnaces and the open areas used for pounding grain.

Unfortunately, the Indus Valley writing system has not yet been deciphered, so historians know relatively little about the organization of Indus society, nor even the name that it called itself (Sumerian sources referred to it as Meluhha). Recent archaeological evidence suggests, however, that unlike its contemporaries in Egypt and Sumer, the Indus Valley society was not a centralized monarchy with a theocratic base but a collection of more than 1,500 towns and cities loosely connected by ties of trade and alliance and ruled by a coalition of landlords and rich merchants. There were no royal precincts or imposing burial monuments, and there are few surviving stone or terracotta images that might represent kings, priests, or military commanders. It is possible that religion had advanced beyond the stage of spirit worship to belief in a single god or goddess of fertility. Drawings of animals on many of the clay seals suggest the possibility of animal sacrifice at ceremonies undertaken to maintain the fertility of the soil and guarantee the annual harvest.

As in Mesopotamia and Egypt, the Indus Valley economy was based primarily on agriculture, and there is evidence that grain crops like wheat, barley, and rice, as well as peas, were cultured as early as seven thousand years ago. The presence of cotton seeds at various sites suggests that the Indus Valley peoples may have been the first to master the cultivation of this useful crop and possibly introduced it, along with rice, to other societies in the region. But they also developed an extensive trading network that extended to Sumer and other



A Mother Goddess. During its period of florescence, from 2600 and 1900 BCE, the craftsmen of the Indus Valley civilization created a variety of terracotta objects, including whimsical toy animals, whistles, and tops, as well as dice, for children. Most enigmatic, however, are the numerous female figurines, such as the one shown here, with elaborate headdress and numerous strands of necklaces. Their meaning and purpose, however, remain elusive. Were they representatives of an earth goddess, reminiscent of a number of other female deities throughout the ancient world? Although the evidence is inconclusive, it is likely that the concept of a fertility goddess was worshipped in the Indus Valley, as it was in other river valleys throughout the region. © DeA Picture Library/Art Resource, NY

civilizations to the west. Textiles and foodstuffs were apparently imported from Sumer in exchange for metals such as copper, lumber, precious stones, and various types of luxury goods. Much of this trade was conducted by ship via the Persian Gulf, although some undoubtedly went by land.

Indus Valley Culture Archaeological remains indicate that the Indus Valley peoples possessed a culture as sophisticated in some ways as that of the Sumerians to the west. Although the architecture was purely functional and shows little artistic sensitivity, the aesthetic quality of some of the pottery and sculpture is superb. Painted pottery, wheel-turned and kiln-fired, rivals equivalent work produced elsewhere. Sculpture, however, was the Indus peoples' highest artistic achievement. Some artifacts possess a wonderful vitality of expression. Fired clay seals show a deft touch in carving animals such as elephants, tigers, rhinoceroses, and antelope, and figures made of copper or terra-cotta

show a lively sensitivity and a sense of grace and movement that is almost modern.

Writing was another achievement of Indus Valley society and dates back at least to the beginning of the third millennium BCE (see Comparative Essay "Writing and Civilization"). Unfortunately, the only surviving examples of writing are the enigmatic symbols inscribed on clay seals and tablets. The script contained more than four hundred characters, but most are too stylized to be identified by their shape and, as noted earlier, scholars have as yet made little progress in being able to decipher them. There are no apparent links with Mesopotamian scripts and although, as in Mesopotamia, the primary purpose of writing may have been to record commercial transactions, some of the clay seals may have been intended to portray religious ceremonies. Until the script is deciphered, much about the Indus Valley civilization must remain, as one historian termed it, a fascinating enigma.

The Collapse of the Indus Valley Civilization One of the great mysteries of the Indus Valley civilization is how it came to an end. The once popular theory that the city of Mohenjo-Daro was invaded and destroyed by marauding Aryan warriors has now been widely dismissed, since the Aryan peoples apparently did not begin to arrive in northwest India until about 1500 BCE, at least four centuries after the apparent abandonment of Mohenjo-Daro. More likely, the Indus Valley civilization had already fallen on hard times, probably as a result of natural causes. Archaeologists have found clear signs of social decay, including evidence of trash in the streets, neglect of public services, and overcrowding in urban neighborhoods. Mohenjo-Daro itself may have been destroyed by an epidemic or by natural phenomena such as floods, an earthquake, or a shift in the course of the Indus River. Some climatologists speculate that the monsoon rains that regularly water the region had weakened at the outset of the second millennium BCE. If that was the case, any migrating peoples arrived in the area after the greatness of Indus Valley civilization had already passed.

HISTORIANS DEBATE

Who Were the Aryans? Historians know relatively little about the origins and culture of the Aryans. The traditional view is that they were Indo-European-speaking peoples who once inhabited vast areas in the steppes north and east of the Black and Caspian Seas. The Indo-Europeans were primarily pastoral peoples who migrated from season to season in search of fodder for their herds, although they may have begun to cultivate grain crops in parts of Central Asia by the fifth millennium BCE. Historians have credited the Aryans with a number of technological achievements, including the invention of horse-drawn chariots and the stirrup, both of which were eventually introduced throughout much of the Eurasian supercontinent.

Whereas many other Indo-European-speaking peoples moved westward and eventually settled throughout Europe, the Aryans began to settle in an area around the Oxus River in Central Asia and then moved south across the Hindu Kush



Harappan/National Museum of India, New Delhi, India/Bridgeman Images

The Dancing Girl. Relatively few objects reflecting the creative talents of the Indus Valley peoples have survived. This bronze figure of a young dancer in repose, 5 inches tall, is a rare metal sculpture from Mohenjo-Daro. The detail and grace of her stance reflect the skill of the artist who molded her some four thousand years ago.

Writing and Civilization

Art & Ideas

When evidence of the complexity and sophistication of the Indus Valley civilization began to emerge in the early twentieth century, among the most tantalizing objects to appear were the clay seals and tablets that contained mysterious inscription in a written language that has not yet been deciphered. Without a greater understanding of the meaning of these enigmatic signs, our knowledge of the Indus Valley civilization must remain rudimentary. This challenge is a testament to the importance of the presence of a written language to enable historians to uncover the secrets of ancient cultures.

According to prehistorians, human beings invented the first spoken language about 50,000 years ago. As human beings spread from Africa to other continents, that initial language gradually fragmented and evolved into innumerable separate tongues. By the time the agricultural revolution began about 10,000 BCE, there were perhaps nearly twenty distinct language families in existence around the world.

During the later stages of the agricultural revolution, the first writing systems also began to emerge in various places around the world (see Map 2.2). The first successful efforts were apparently achieved in Mesopotamia and Egypt, but knowledge of writing soon spread to peoples along the shores of the Mediterranean and in the Indus River Valley in South Asia. Wholly independent systems were also invented in China and Mesoamerica. Writing was used for a variety of purposes. One reason was to enable a ruler to communicate with his subjects on matters of official concern, as when the Egyptian king Scorpion in about 3250 BCE ordered that a decree announcing that his forces had achieved a major victory over rivals in the region be inscribed on a limestone cliff in the Nile River Valley. In other cases, the purpose was to enable human beings to communicate with supernatural forces. In China and Egypt, for example, priests used writing to communicate with the gods. In Mesopotamia and in the Indus River Valley, merchants apparently used writing to mark official events or to record commercial and other legal transactions. Finally, writing was also used to present ideas in new ways, giving rise to such early Mesopotamian literature as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

How did these early written languages evolve into the complex systems in use today? In almost all cases, the first systems consisted of pictographs, pictorial images of various

into the plains of northern India. Between 1500 and 1000 BCE, they gradually advanced eastward from the Indus Valley, across the fertile plain of the Ganges River, and some migrated southward into the Deccan Plateau. Eventually, they extended their political mastery over the entire subcontinent and its mainly Dravidian-speaking inhabitants, although the indigenous

concrete objects such as trees, water, cattle, body parts, and the heavenly bodies. Eventually, the pictographs became more stylized to facilitate transcription—much as we often use a cursive script instead of block printing today. Finally, and most important for their future development, these pictorial images began to take on specific phonetic meanings so that they could represent sounds in the written language. Most sophisticated written systems eventually evolved to a phonetic script, based on an alphabet of symbols to represent all sounds in the spoken language, but others went only part of the way by adding phonetic signs to the individual character to suggest pronunciation while keeping the essence of the original pictograph to indicate meaning. Most of the latter systems, such as hieroglyphics in Egypt and cuneiform in Mesopotamia, eventually became extinct, but the ancient Chinese writing system survives today, in greatly altered form.

Q What are the various purposes for which writing systems were developed in the ancient world? What appears to have been the initial purpose for the development of the Indus Valley script?

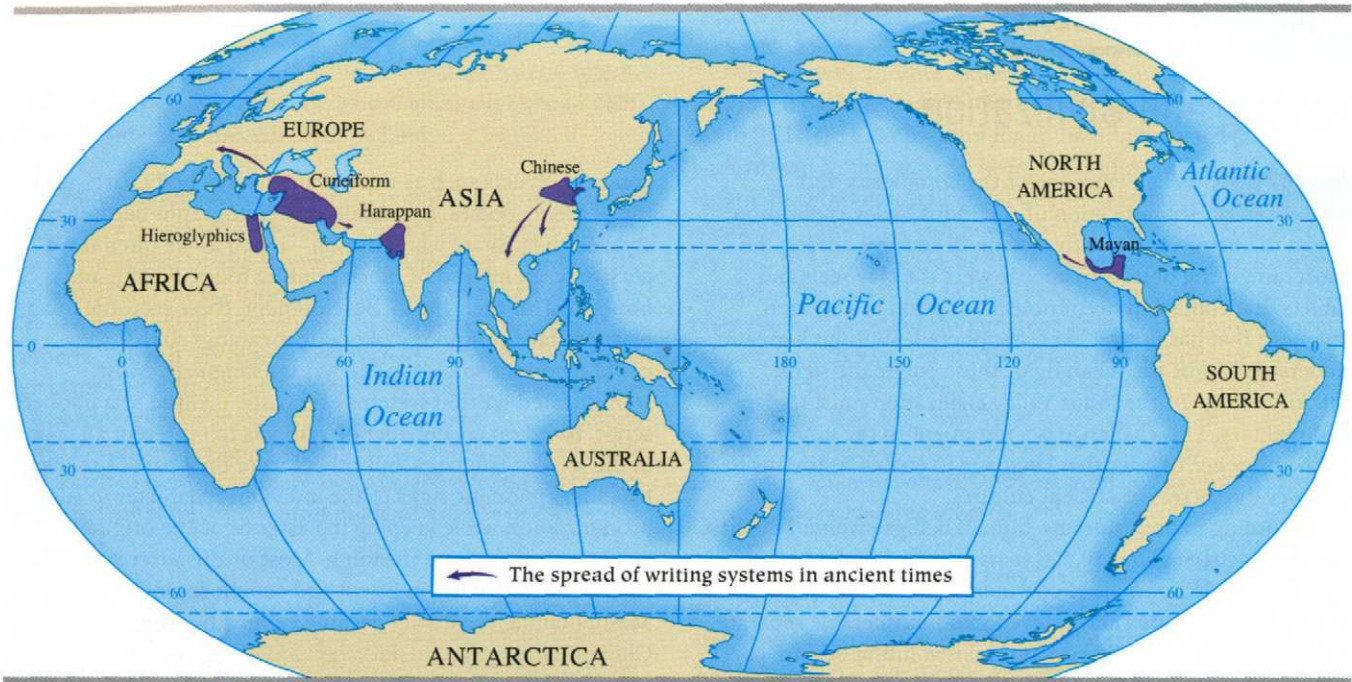


Scala/Art Resources, NY

Indus Valley Seals. The Indus Valley peoples, like their contemporaries in Mesopotamia, developed a writing system to record their spoken language. Unfortunately, it has not yet been deciphered. Most extant examples of early writing from the area are found on fired clay seals depicting human figures and animals. These seals have been found in houses and were probably used to identify the owners of goods for sale. Other seals may have been used as amulets or have had other religious significance. Several depict religious figures or ritualistic scenes of sacrifice.

culture undoubtedly survived to remain a prominent element in the evolution of traditional Indian civilization.

In recent years, a new theory has been proposed by some historians in India, who contend that the Aryan peoples did not migrate into the Indian subcontinent from Central Asia, but were in fact descendants of the indigenous population that



Map 2.2 Writing Systems in the Ancient World. One of the chief characteristics of the first civilizations was the development of a system of written communication.

Q Based on the Comparative Essay, “Writing and Civilization,” in what ways were these first writing systems similar, and how were they different?

had originally created the Indus Valley civilization. Most scholars, however, continue to support the migration hypothesis, although the evidence is not conclusive. They point out that the spoken language of the Aryan people, known as Sanskrit, is widely recognized as a branch of the Indo-European family of languages. Moreover, the earliest account produced by the Aryan people themselves, known as the Rig Veda (RIK VAY-duh) (see next section), describes a culture based primarily on pastoralism, a pursuit not particularly suited to the Indus River valley. Significantly, the tradition of buffalo sacrifice, inscribed on innumerable seals throughout the Indus River Valley, is not mentioned in the Rig Veda. A definitive solution to the debate will have to await further evidence.

2-2 THE ARYANS IN INDIA

Q Focus Question: What were some of the distinctive features of the class system introduced by the Aryan peoples, and what effects did it have on Indian civilization?

After they settled in India, the Aryans gradually adapted to the geographic realities of their new homeland and abandoned the pastoral life for agricultural pursuits. They were assisted by the invention of iron, which was probably introduced from the Middle East, where it had been introduced by the Hittites (see Chapter 1) about 1500 BCE. The invention of the iron plow, along with the development of irrigation, enabled the Aryans

and their indigenous subjects to clear the dense jungle growth along the Ganges River and transform the Ganges Valley into one of the richest agricultural regions in South Asia. The Aryans also developed their own writing system, based on the Aramaic script of the Middle East, and were thus able to transcribe the legends that previously had been passed down from generation to generation by memory (see “Writing and Civilization” on p. 43). Most of what is known about the early Aryans is based on oral traditions passed on in the Rig Veda, an ancient work that was written down after the Aryans arrived in India (it is one of several Vedas, or collections of sacred instructions and rituals, see “In the Beginning”).

2-2a From Chieftains to Kings

As in other Indo-European societies, each of the various Aryan tribes was led by a chieftain, called a **raja** (RAH-juh), who was assisted by a council of elders composed of other leading members of the community; like them, he was normally a member of the warrior class, called the **kshatriya** (kshuh-TREE-yuh). The chief derived his power from his ability to protect his people from rival groups, a skill that was crucial in the warring kingdoms and shifting alliances that were typical of early Aryan society. Though the rajas claimed to be representatives of the gods, they were not viewed as gods themselves.

As Aryan society grew in size and complexity, the chieftains began to be transformed into kings, usually called **maharajas** (mah-huh-RAH-juhs) (“great rajahs”). Nevertheless, the tradition that the ruler did not possess absolute authority

IN THE BEGINNING

Religion & Philosophy

AS THE INDIANS BEGAN TO SPECULATE about the nature of the cosmic order, they came to believe in the existence of a single monistic force in the universe, a form of ultimate reality called *Brahman*. Today the early form of Hinduism is sometimes called Brahmanism. In the Upanishads (oo-PAHN-ih-shahds), the concept began to emerge as an important element of Indian religious belief. It was the duty of the individual self—called the *Atman*—to achieve an understanding of this ultimate reality so that after death the self would merge in spiritual form with *Brahman*. Sometimes *Brahman* was described in more concrete terms as a creator god—eventually known as Vishnu—but more often in terms of a shadowy ultimate reality. In the following passage from the Upanishads, the author speculates on the nature of ultimate reality.

The Upanishads

In the beginning . . . , this world was just being, one only, without a second. Some people, no doubt, say: “In the beginning . . . , this world was just nonbeing, one only, without

Source: From *The Upanishads*, tr. Juan Mascaro. Viking Press, 1965.

remained strong. Like all human beings, the ruler was required to follow the *dharma* (DAR-muh), a set of laws that set behavioral standards for all individuals and classes in Indian society.

The Impact of the Greeks While competing groups squabbled for precedence in India, powerful new empires were rising to the west. First came the Persian Empire of Cyrus and Darius. Then came the Greeks. After two centuries of sporadic rivalry and warfare, the Greeks achieved a brief period of regional dominance in the late fourth century BCE with the rise of Macedonia under Alexander the Great. Alexander had heard



Alexander the Great's Movements in Asia

of the riches of India, and in 330 BCE, after conquering Persia, he launched an invasion of the east (see Chapter 4). In 326 BCE, his armies arrived in the plains of northwestern India and the Indus River Valley. They departed almost as suddenly as they had come, leaving in their wake Greek administrators

a second; from that nonbeing, being was produced.” But how indeed . . . could it be so? How could being be produced from nonbeing? . . .

In the beginning this world was being alone, one only, without a second. Being thought to itself: “May I be many, may I procreate.” It produced fire. That fire thought to itself: “May I be many, may I procreate.” It produced water. Therefore, whenever a person grieves or perspires, then it is from fire [heat] alone that water is produced. That water thought to itself: “May I be many, may I procreate.” It produced food; it is from water alone that food for eating is produced. . . . That divinity (Being) thought to itself: “Well, having entered into these three divinities [fire, water, and food] by means of this living self, let me develop names and forms.”

Q How would you compare this passage from the Upanishads with the accounts about the origins of life from Egyptian and Hebrew sources as cited in Chapter 1?

and a veneer of cultural influence that would affect the area for generations to come.

2-2b The Mauryan Empire

The Alexandrian conquest was a brief interlude in the history of the Indian subcontinent, but it played a formative role, for on the heels of Alexander's departure came the rise of the first dynasty to control much of the region. The founder of the new state, who took the royal title Chandragupta Maurya (chun-druh-GOOP-tuh MOWR-yuh) (324–301 BCE), drove out the Greek administrators that Alexander had left behind and solidified his control over the northern Indian plain. He established the capital of his new Mauryan Empire at Pataliputra (pah-tah-lee-POO-truh) (modern Patna) in the Ganges Valley (see Map 2.3). Little is known of his origins, although some sources say he had originally fought on the side of the invading Greek forces but then angered Alexander with his outspoken advice.

Little, too, is known of Chandragupta Maurya's empire. Most accounts of his reign rely on the scattered remnants of a lost work written by Megasthenes (muh-GAS-thuh-nee-z), a Greek ambassador to the Mauryan court, in about 302 BCE. Chandragupta Maurya was apparently advised by a brilliant court official named Kautilya (kow-TIL-yuh), whose name has been attached to a treatise on politics called the *Arthashastra*. The work actually dates from a later time, but it may well reflect Kautilya's ideas.

Although the author of the *Arthashastra* follows Aryan tradition in stating that the happiness of the king lies in the happiness of his subjects, the treatise also asserts that when the sacred law of the *dharma* and practical politics collide, the latter must take precedence: "Whenever there is disagreement between history and sacred law or between evidence and sacred law, then the matter should be settled in accordance with sacred law. But whenever sacred law is in conflict with rational law, then reason shall be held authoritative."¹ The *Arthashastra* also emphasizes ends rather than means, achieved results rather than the methods employed. For this reason, it has often been compared to Machiavelli's famous political treatise of the Italian Renaissance, *The Prince*, written more than a thousand years later.

As described in the *Arthashastra*, Chandragupta Maurya's government was highly centralized and even despotic: "It is power and power alone which, only when exercised by the king with impartiality, and in proportion to guilt, over his son or his enemy, maintains both this world and the next."² The king possessed a large army and a secret police responsible to his orders (according to the Greek ambassador Megasthenes, Chandragupta Maurya was chronically fearful of assassination, a not unrealistic concern for someone who had allegedly come to power by violence). Reportedly, all food was tasted in his presence, and he made a practice of never sleeping twice in the same bed in his sumptuous palace. To guard against corruption, a board of censors was empowered to investigate cases of possible malfeasance and incompetence within the bureaucracy.

The ruler's authority beyond the confines of the capital may often have been limited, however. The empire was divided into provinces that were ruled by governors. At first, most of these governors were appointed by and reported to the ruler, but later the position became hereditary. The provinces themselves were divided into districts, each under a chief magistrate appointed by the governor. At the base of the government pyramid was the village, where the vast majority of the Indian people lived. The village was governed by a council of elders; membership in the council was normally hereditary and was shared by the wealthiest families in the village.

2-2c Caste and Class: Social Structures in Ancient India

When the Aryans arrived in India, they already possessed a social system based on a ruling warrior class and other groupings characteristic of a pastoral society. In the subcontinent, they encountered peoples living by farming or, in some cases, by other pursuits such as fishing, hunting, or food gathering. Although the immediate consequences of this mixture of cultures are still unclear, the ultimate result was the emergence of a complex set of social institutions that continues to have relevance down to the present day.

The Class System At the crux of the social system that emerged from the clash of cultures was the concept of a hierarchical division of society that placed each individual within

a ritual framework that defined the person's occupation and status within the broader community. In part, this division may have been an outgrowth of attitudes held by the Aryan peoples with regard to the indigenous population. The Aryans, who followed primarily pastoral pursuits, tended to look askance at their new neighbors, who lived by tilling the soil. Further, the Aryans, a mostly light-skinned people, were contemptuous of the indigenous peoples, who were darker. Light skin came to imply high status, whereas dark skin suggested the opposite.

The concept of color, however, was only the physical manifestation of a division that took place in Indian society on the basis of economic functions. Indian classes (called *varna*, literally, "color," and commonly but mistakenly translated as "castes" in English) did not simply reflect an informal division of labor. Instead, at least in theory, they were a set of rigid social classifications that determined not only one's occupation but also one's status in society and one's hope for ultimate salvation (see Section 2-3, "Escaping the Wheel of Life" on p. 51). There were five major *varna* in Indian society in ancient times (see "Social Classes in Ancient India"). At the top were two classes, collectively viewed as the aristocracy, which represented the ruling elites in Aryan society prior to their arrival in India: the priests and the warriors.

The priestly class, known as the *brahmins*, was usually considered to be at the top of the social scale. Descended from seers who had advised the ruler on religious matters in Aryan tribal society—*brahmin* meant "one possessed of *Brahman*" (BRAH-mun), a term for the supreme god—they were eventually transformed into an official class after their religious role declined in importance. Megasthenes described this class as follows:

From the time of their conception in the womb they are under the care and guardianship of learned men who go to the mother and . . . give her prudent hints and counsels, and the women who listen to them most willingly are thought to be the most fortunate in their offspring. After their birth the children are in the care of one person after another, and as they advance in years their masters are men of superior accomplishments. The philosophers reside in a grove in front of the city within a moderate-sized enclosure. They live in a simple style and lie on pallets of straw and [deer] skins. They abstain from animal food and sexual pleasures, and occupy their time in listening to serious discourse and in imparting knowledge to willing ears.³

The second class was the *kshatriya*, the warriors. Although often listed below the *brahmins* in social status, many *kshatriyas* were probably descended from the ruling warrior class in Aryan society prior to the conquest of India and thus may have originally ranked socially above the *brahmins*, although they were ranked lower in religious terms. Like the *brahmins*, the *kshatriyas* were originally identified with a single occupation—fighting—but as the character of Aryan society changed, they often switched to other forms of employment. At the same time, new families from other classes were sometimes tacitly accepted into the ranks of the warriors.

SOCIAL CLASSES IN ANCIENT INDIA

Family & Society

THE LAW OF MANU IS A SET OF BEHAVIORAL NORMS

that, according to tradition, were prescribed by India's mythical founding ruler, Manu. The treatise was probably written in the first or second century BCE. The following excerpt describes the various social classes in India and their prescribed duties. Many scholars doubt that the social system in India was ever as rigid as it was portrayed here, and some suggest that upper-class Indians may have used the idea of *varna* to enhance their own status in society.

The Law of Manu

For the sake of the preservation of this entire creation, the Exceedingly Resplendent One [the Creator of the Universe] assigned separate duties to the classes which had sprung from his mouth, arms, thighs, and feet.

Teaching, studying, performing sacrificial rites, so too making others perform sacrificial rites, and giving away and receiving gifts—these he assigned to the [*brahmins*].

Protection of the people, giving away of wealth, performance of sacrificial rites, study, and nonattachment to sensual pleasures—these are, in short, the duties of a *kshatriya*.

Source: Manu Smṛti 3.55–57; Ed. J. Jolly. London: Trubner, 1887 (Trubner Oriental Series).

Tending of cattle, giving away of wealth, performance of sacrificial rites, study, trade and commerce, usury, and agriculture—these are the occupations of a *vaisya*.

The Lord has prescribed only one occupation [*karma*] for a *sudra*, namely, service without malice of even these other three classes.

Of created beings, those which are animate are the best; of the animate, those which subsist by means of their intellect; of the intelligent, men are the best; and of men, the [*brahmins*] are traditionally declared to be the best.

The code of conduct—prescribed by scriptures and ordained by sacred tradition—constitutes the highest *dharmā*; hence a twice-born person, conscious of his own Self [seeking spiritual salvation], should be always scrupulous in respect of it.

Q Based on this description, how does the class system in ancient India compare with social class divisions in other societies in Asia? Why do you think the class system, as described here, developed in India? What is the difference between the class system (*varna*) and the *jati* (discussed later in this chapter)?

The third-ranked class in Indian society was the *vaisya* (VISH-yuh) (literally, “commoner”). The *vaisyas* were usually viewed in economic terms as the merchant class. Some historians have speculated that the *vaisyas* were originally guardians of the tribal herds but that after settling in India, many moved into commercial pursuits. Megasthenes noted that members of this class “alone are permitted to hunt and keep cattle and to sell beasts of burden or to let them out on hire. In return for clearing the land of wild beasts and birds which infest sown fields, they receive an allowance of corn from the king. They lead a wandering life and dwell in tents.”⁴ Although this class was ranked below the first two in social status, it shared with them the privilege of being considered “twice-born,” a term referring to a ceremony at puberty whereby young males were initiated into adulthood and introduced into Indian society. After the ceremony, male members of the top three classes were allowed to wear the “sacred thread” for the remainder of their lives.

Below the three “twice-born” classes were the *sudras* (SOO-druhs or SHOO-druhs), who represented the great bulk of the Indian population. The *sudras* were not considered fully Aryan, and the term probably originally referred to the indigenous population. Most *sudras* were peasants or artisans or worked at other forms of manual labor. They had only limited rights in society. In recent years, DNA samples have revealed that most upper-class South Indians today share more genetic characteristics with modern Europeans than their lower-class counterparts do,

CHRONOLOGY	Ancient India
Indus Valley civilization	c. 2600–1900 BCE
Arrival of the Aryans	c. 1500 BCE
Life of Gautama Buddha	c. 560–480 BCE
Invasion of India by Alexander the Great	326 BCE
Mauryan dynasty founded	324 BCE
Reign of Chandragupta Maurya	324–301 BCE
Reign of Ashoka	269–232 BCE
Collapse of Mauryan dynasty	183 BCE
Rise of Kushan kingdom	c. first century CE

a finding that supports the hypothesis that the Aryans established their political and social dominance over the indigenous population.

At the lowest level of Indian society, and in fact not even considered a legitimate part of the class system, were the untouchables (also known as outcastes or *pariahs*). The untouchables probably originated as a slave class consisting of prisoners of war, criminals, ethnic minorities, and other groups considered outside Indian society. Even after slavery was outlawed, the untouchables were given menial and degrading tasks that other Indians would not accept, such as collecting trash, handling dead bodies, or serving as butchers or tanners. One historian

estimates that they may have accounted for a little more than 5 percent of the total population of India in antiquity.

The lives of the untouchables were extremely demeaning. They were regarded as being not fully human, and their very presence was considered polluting to members of the other *varna*. No Indian would touch or eat food handled or prepared by an untouchable. Untouchables lived in ghettos and, according to a foreign observer, were required to tap two sticks together to announce their approach when they traveled outside their quarters so that others could avoid them.

Technically, these class divisions were absolute. Individuals supposedly were born, lived, and died in the same class. In practice, upward or downward mobility probably took place, and there was undoubtedly some flexibility in economic functions. But throughout most of Indian history, class taboos remained strict. Members generally were not permitted to marry outside their class (although in practice, men were occasionally allowed to marry below their class but not above it). At first, attitudes toward the handling of food were relatively loose, but eventually that taboo grew stronger, and social mores dictated that sharing meals and marrying outside one's class were unacceptable.

The Jati The people of ancient India did not belong to a particular class as individuals but as part of a larger kin group commonly referred to as the *jati* (JAH-tee) (in Portuguese, *casta*, which evolved into the English term *caste*), a system of extended families that originated in ancient India and still exists in somewhat changed form today. Although the origins of the *jati* system are unknown (there are no indications of strict class distinctions in Harappan society), the *jati* eventually became identified with a specific kinship group living in a specific area and carrying out a specific function in society. Each *jati* was identified with a particular *varna*, and each had its own separate economic function.

Jatis were thus the basic social organization into which traditional Indian society was divided. Each *jati* was composed of hundreds or thousands of individual nuclear families and was governed by its own council of elders. Membership in this ruling council was usually hereditary and was based on the wealth or social status of particular families within the community.

In theory, each *jati* was assigned a particular form of economic activity. Obviously, though, not all families in a given *jati* could take part in the same vocation, and as time went on, members of a single *jati* commonly engaged in several different lines of work. Sometimes an entire *jati* would have to move its location in order to continue a particular form of activity. In other cases, a *jati* would adopt an entirely new occupation in order to remain in a certain area. Such changes in habitat or occupation introduced the possibility of movement up or down the social scale. In this way, an entire *jati* could sometimes engage in upward mobility, even though that normally was not possible for individuals, who were tied to their class identity for life.

The class system in ancient India may sound highly constricting, but there were persuasive social and economic reasons why it survived for so many centuries. In the first place, it provided an identity for individuals in a highly hierarchical society. Although an individual might rank lower on the social scale than

members of other classes, it was always possible to find others ranked even lower. Class was also a means for new groups, such as mountain tribal people, to achieve a recognizable place in the broader community. Perhaps equally important, the *jati* was a primitive form of welfare system. Each *jati* was obliged to provide for any of its members who were poor or destitute. It also provided an element of stability in a society that all too often was in a state of political turmoil.

2-2d Daily Life in Ancient India

Beyond these rigid social stratifications was the Indian family. Not only was life centered around the family, but the family, not the individual, was the most basic unit in society.

The Family The ideal social unit was an extended family, with three generations living under the same roof. It was essentially patriarchal, except along the Malabar coast, near the southwestern tip of the subcontinent, where a matriarchal form of social organization prevailed down to modern times. In the rest of India, the oldest male traditionally possessed legal authority over the entire family unit.

The family was linked together in a religious sense to its ancestral members by a series of commemorative rites. Family ceremonies were conducted to honor the departed and to link the living and the dead. The male family head was responsible for leading the ritual. At his death, his eldest son had the duty of conducting the funeral rites.

The importance of the father and the son in family ritual underlined the importance of males in Indian society. Male superiority was expressed in a variety of ways. Women could not serve as priests (although some were accepted as seers), nor were they normally permitted to study the Vedas. In general, males had a monopoly on education, since the primary goal of learning to read was to conduct family rituals. In high-class families, young men, after having been initiated into the sacred thread, began Vedic studies with a *guru* (teacher). Some then went on to higher studies in one of the major cities. The goal of such an education might be either professional or religious. Such young men were not supposed to marry until after twelve years of study.

The Role of Women In general, only males could inherit property, except in a few cases when there were no sons. According to law, a woman was always considered a minor. Divorce was prohibited, although it sometimes took place. According to the *Arthashastra*, a wife who had been deserted by her husband could seek a divorce. Polygamy was fairly rare and apparently occurred mainly among the higher classes, but husbands were permitted to take a second wife if the first was barren. Producing children was an important aspect of marriage, both because children provided security for their parents in old age and because they were a physical proof of male potency. Child marriage was common for young girls, whether because of the desire for children or because daughters represented an economic liability to their parents. But perhaps the most graphic symbol of women's subjection to men was the ritual of *sati*

(suh-TEE) (often written *suttee*), which encouraged the wife to throw herself on her dead husband's funeral pyre. The Greek visitor Megasthenes reported "that he had heard from some persons of wives burning themselves along with their deceased husbands and doing so gladly; and that those women who refused to burn themselves were held in disgrace."⁵ All in all, it was undoubtedly a difficult existence. According to the *Law of Manu*, an early treatise on social organization and behavior in ancient India, probably written in the first or second century BCE, a woman was subordinated to men throughout her life—first to her father, then to her husband, and finally to her sons:

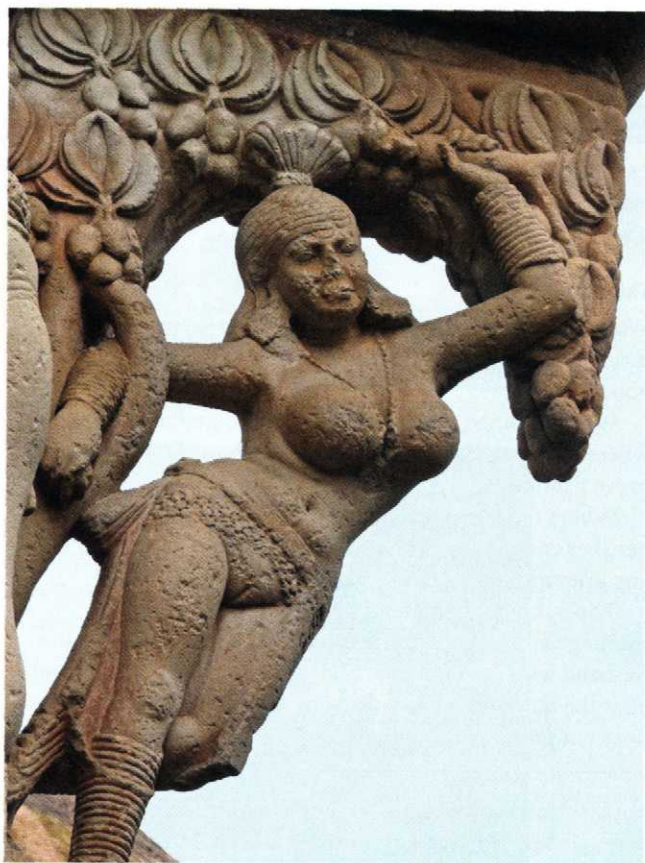
*She should do nothing independently
even in her own house.
In childhood subject to her father,
in youth to her husband,
and when her husband is dead to her sons,
she should never enjoy independence. . . .
Though he be uncouth and prone to pleasure,
though he have no good points at all,
the virtuous wife should ever
worship her lord as a god.⁶*

At the root of female subordination to the male was the practical fact that as in most agricultural societies, men did most of the work in the fields. Females were viewed as having little utility outside the home and indeed were considered an economic burden, since parents were obliged to provide a dowry to acquire a husband for a daughter. Female children also appeared to offer little advantage in maintaining the family unit, since they joined the families of their husbands after the wedding ceremony.

Despite all of these indications of female subjection to the male, there are numerous signs that in some ways women often played an influential role in Indian society, and the code of behavior set out in the *Law of Manu* stressed that they should be treated with respect (see "The Position of Women in Ancient India" on p. 50). Indians appeared to be fascinated by female sexuality, and tradition held that women often used their sexual powers to achieve domination over men. The author of the *Mahabharata*, a vast epic of early Indian society, complained that "the fire has never too many logs, the ocean never too many rivers, death never too many living souls, and fair-eyed woman never too many men." Despite the legal and social constraints, women often played an important role within the family unit, and many were admired and honored for their talents. It is probably significant that paintings and sculpture from ancient and medieval India frequently show women in a role equal to that of men, and the tradition of the henpecked husband is as prevalent in India as in many Western societies today.

2-2e The Economy

The arrival of the Aryans did not drastically change the economic character of Indian society. Not only did most Aryans eventually take up farming, but it is likely that agriculture expanded rapidly under Aryan rule with the invention of the iron plow and the spread of northern Indian culture into the Deccan Plateau. One



age fotostock/Alamy

Female Earth Spirit. This earth spirit, carved on a gatepost of the Buddhist stupa at Sanchi 2,200 years ago, illustrates how earlier representations of the fertility goddess were incorporated into Buddhist art. Women were revered as powerful fertility symbols and considered dangerous when menstruating or immediately after giving birth. Voluptuous and idealized, the earth spirit was believed to be able to cause a tree to blossom by wrapping her leg around its trunk or even merely touching a branch with her arm. Belief in the sacred quality of the banyan and the pipal tree, two of the most majestic trees found throughout South Asia, has been a characteristic of religious belief in the subcontinent since the Indus Valley civilization.

consequence of this process was to shift the focus of Indian culture from the Indus Valley farther eastward to the Ganges River Valley, which even today is one of the most densely populated regions on earth. The flatter areas in the Deccan Plateau and in the coastal plains were also turned into cropland.

Indian Farmers For most Indian farmers, life was harsh. Among the most fortunate were those who owned their own land, although they were required to pay taxes to the state. Many others were sharecroppers or landless laborers. They were subject to the vicissitudes of the market and often paid exorbitant rents to their landlord. Concentration of land in large holdings was limited by the tradition of dividing property among all the sons, but large estates worked by hired laborers or rented out to sharecroppers were not uncommon, particularly in areas where local rajars derived much of their wealth from their property.

THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA

Family & Society

THE AMBIVALENT ATTITUDE TOWARD WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA is evident in this passage from the *Law of Manu*, which states that respect for women is the responsibility of men. At the same time, it also makes clear that a woman's place is in the home.

The Law of Manu

Women must be honored and adorned by their father, brothers, husbands, and brother-in-law who desire great good fortune.

Where women, verily, are honored, there the gods rejoice, where, however they are not honored, there all sacred rites prove fruitless.

Where the female relations live in grief—that family soon perishes completely; where, however, they do not suffer from any grievance—that family always prospers. . . .

The father who does not give away his daughter in marriage at the proper time is censurable; censurable is the husband who does not approach his wife in due season; and after the husband is dead, the son, verily is censurable, who does not protect his mother.

Source: *Manu Smṛti* 3.55–57; Ed. J. Jolly. London: Trubner, 1887 (Trubner Oriental Series).

Even against the slightest provocations should women be particularly guarded; for unguarded they would bring grief to both the families.

Regarding this as the highest *dharma* of all four classes, husbands though weak, must strive to protect their wives.

His own offspring, character, family, self, and *dharma* does one protect when he protects his wife scrupulously. . . .

The husband should engage his wife in the collections and expenditure of his wealth, in cleanliness, in *dharma*, in cooking food for the family, and in looking after the necessities of the household. . . .

Women destined to bear children, enjoying great good fortune, deserving of worship, the resplendent lights of homes on the one hand and divinities of good luck who reside in the houses on the other—between these there is no difference whatsoever.



How do these attitudes toward women compare with those we have encountered in the Middle East and North Africa?

Silk Road was under way by at least the millennium BCE (see Chapters 9 and 10). Maritime commerce across the Indian Ocean may have begun as early as the fifth century BCE. It extended eastward as far as Southeast Asia and China and southward as far as the straits between Africa and the island of Madagascar. Westward to Egypt went spices, teakwood, perfumes, jewels, textiles, precious stones and ivory, and wild animals. In return, India received gold, tin, lead, and wine. The subcontinent had become a major crossroads of trade in the ancient world.

India's expanding role as a manufacturing and commercial hub was undoubtedly a spur to the growth of the state. Under Chandragupta Maurya, the central government became actively involved in commercial and manufacturing activities. It owned mines and land and undoubtedly earned massive profits from its role in regional commerce. Separate government departments were established for trade, agriculture, mining, and the manufacture of weapons, and the movement of private goods was vigorously taxed. Nevertheless, a significant private sector also flourished; it was dominated by great caste guilds, which monopolized key sectors of the economy. A money economy probably came into operation during the second century BCE, when copper and gold coins were introduced from the Middle East. This in turn led to the development of banking. But village trade continued to be conducted by means of cowry shells (highly polished shells used as a medium of exchange throughout much of Africa and Asia) or barter throughout the ancient period.

Another problem for Indian farmers was the unpredictability of the climate. India is in the monsoon zone. The monsoon is a seasonal wind pattern in southern Asia that blows from the southwest during the summer months and from the northeast during the winter. The southwest monsoon, originating in the Indian Ocean, is commonly marked by heavy rains. When the rains were late, thousands starved, particularly in the drier areas, which were especially dependent on rainfall. Strong governments attempted to deal with such problems by building state-operated granaries and maintaining the irrigation works, but strong governments were rare, and famine was probably all too common. As noted above, a lengthy interruption in the seasonal monsoon pattern may have contributed to the collapse of the Indus Valley civilization. The staple crops in the north were wheat, barley, and millet, while wet rice was common in the fertile river valleys. In the south, grain and vegetables were supplemented by various tropical products, cotton, and spices such as pepper, ginger, cinnamon, and saffron.

Trade and Manufacturing By no means were all Indians farmers. As time passed, India became one of the most advanced trading and manufacturing civilizations in the ancient world. After the rise of the Mauryas, India's role in regional trade began to expand, and the subcontinent became a major transit point in a vast commercial network that extended from the rim of the Pacific Ocean to the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea. This regional trade went both by sea and by camel caravan. Overland trade via what is now known as the

COMPARATIVE ILLUSTRATION

Art & Ideas

The First Money. Before the invention of metal coins, many societies used items from nature like beads or shells as an early form of currency. Cowry shells (in A) have been found in coastal areas throughout the Indian Ocean; their use later spread to China and as far as Africa, where they continued to be used until the early modern era. In this illustration, a string of cowrie shells adorns a small fishing vessel in the Persian Gulf, presumably in the expectation that it will provide its owner with good fortune. The first metal coins appeared around 500 BCE, when Greek communities along the Turkish coast began to mint silver coins decorated with portraits of rulers or deities. The practice spread to Central and South Asia in the fourth century BCE with the armies of Alexander the Great. After his departure, Hellenistic kingdoms founded in the region minted beautiful silver and gold coins in the Greek style and carried them southward with the Greco-Bactrian invasion of northwest India (symbolized by the elephant headdress on King Demetrius I in image B) in 180 BCE. From that time on, metal coins were used for most important transactions in South Asian societies, with cowry shells used for items of lesser value.

Q How does the monetary system used in ancient India compare with that practiced in ancient societies in the Mediterranean and the Middle East?

A



William J. Duiker

B



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2-3 ESCAPING THE WHEEL OF LIFE: THE RELIGIOUS WORLD OF ANCIENT INDIA

Q **Focus Questions:** What are the main tenets of Brahmanism and Buddhism? How did they differ, and how did each religion influence Indian civilization?

As with Indian politics and society, Indian religion is a blend of Aryan and Dravidian culture. The intermingling of those two civilizations gave rise to an extraordinarily complex set of religious beliefs and practices, filled with diversity and contrast. Out of this cultural mix came two of the world's great religions, Buddhism and Hinduism, and several smaller ones, including Jainism and Sikhism. Early Aryan religious beliefs, however, are known to historians as **Brahmanism**. In time, Brahmanical beliefs and practices would give rise to Hinduism, as will be discussed in Chapter 9. Here we will focus on the earliest religious traditions and on the origins of Buddhism.

2-3a Brahmanism

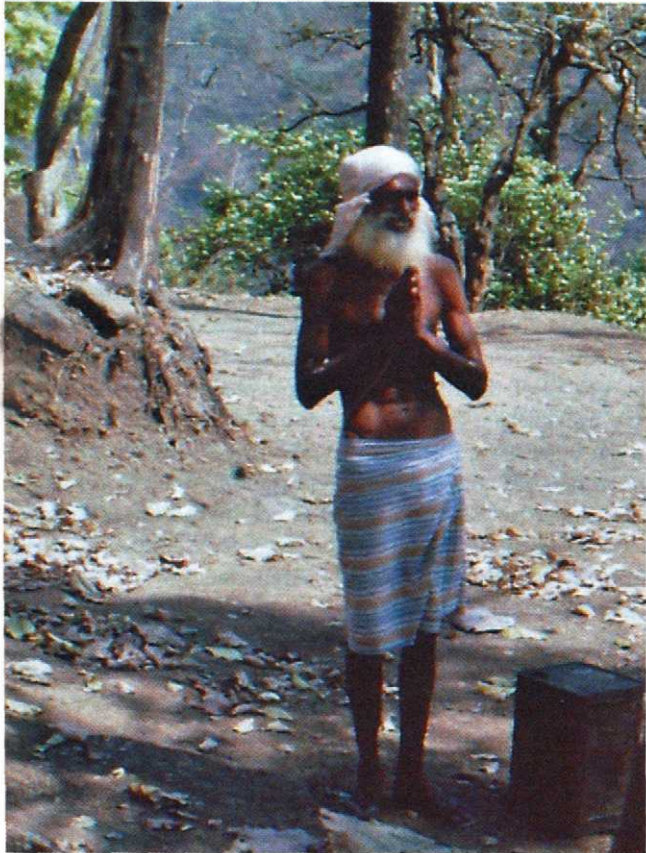
While little is known about the form of religion practiced in the Indus Valley civilization, evidence about the earliest religious

beliefs of the Aryan peoples is better documented, and comes primarily from sacred texts such as the Vedas, four collections of hymns and religious ceremonies originally transmitted by memory by Aryan priests, and systematized in form by about 1000 BCE. Many of these religious ideas were probably common to all of the Indo-European peoples before their separation into different groups at least four thousand years ago. Early Aryan beliefs were based on the common concept of a pantheon of gods and goddesses representing great forces of nature similar to the immortals of Greek mythology. The Aryan ancestor of the Greek father-god Zeus, for example, may have been the deity known in early Aryan tradition as Dyaus (see Chapter 4).

The parent god Dyaus was a somewhat distant figure, however, who was eventually overshadowed by other, more functional gods possessing more familiar human traits. For a while, the primary Aryan god was the great warrior god Indra. Indra summoned the Aryan tribal peoples to war and was represented in nature by thunder. Later, Indra declined in importance and was replaced by Varuna, lord of justice. Other gods and goddesses represented various forces of nature or the needs of human beings, such as fire, fertility, and wealth. During Vedic times, the concept of sacrifice was a key means of communicating with celestial forces. As in many other ancient cultures, the practice may have begun as human sacrifice, but later animals were used as substitutes. The priestly class, the *brahmins*, played a key role in these ceremonies.

Another element of Indian religious belief in ancient times was the ideal of *asceticism*. Although there is no reference to such practices in the Vedas, by the sixth century BCE, self-discipline or subjecting oneself to painful stimuli had begun to replace sacrifice as a means of placating or communicating with the gods. Apparently, the original motive for asceticism was to achieve magical powers, but later, in the Upanishads—a set of commentaries on the Vedas compiled in the sixth century BCE—it was seen as a means of spiritual meditation that would enable the practitioner to reach beyond material reality to a world of truth and bliss beyond earthly joy and sorrow. It is possible that another motive was to permit those with strong religious convictions to communicate directly with metaphysical reality without having to rely on the priestly class at court.

Asceticism, of course, has been practiced in other religions, including Christianity and Islam, but it seems particularly identified with Hinduism, the religion that emerged from the early Indian religious tradition. Eventually, asceticism evolved into the modern practice of body training that we know as *yoga* (“union”), which is accepted today as a meaningful element of Hindu religious practice.



William J. Duiker

The Searcher. In their search for truth and the ultimate reality, some early followers of Brahmanism embarked on a lifelong retreat from the material world. The holy scripture for such early ascetics was the Upanishads, a collection of writings dating from the middle of the first millennium BCE extolling a life of privation and self-denial. The practice continues today, as this photograph of an Indian mendicant wandering in the mountains of the Deccan Plateau attests.

Reincarnation Another new concept that probably began to appear around the time the Upanishads were written was **reincarnation**. This is the idea that the individual soul is reborn in a different form after death and progresses through several existences on the wheel of life until it reaches its final destination in a union with the Great World Soul, *Brahman*. Because life is harsh, this final release is the objective of all living souls. From this concept comes the term *Brahmanism*, referring to the early Aryan religious tradition.

A key element in this process is the idea of *karma*—that one’s rebirth in a next life is determined by one’s actions (*karma*) in this life (see Opposing Viewpoints “The Search for Truth” on p. 54). Hinduism, as it emerged from Brahmanism, placed all living species on a vast scale of existence, including the four classes and the untouchables in human society. The current status of an individual soul, then, is not simply a cosmic accident but the inevitable result of actions that that soul has committed in its past existence.

At the top of the scale are the *brahmins*, who by definition are closest to ultimate release from the law of reincarnation. The *brahmins* are followed in descending order by the other classes in human society and the world of the beasts. Within the animal kingdom, an especially high position is reserved for the cow, which even today is revered by Hindus as a sacred beast. Some scholars have speculated that the unique role played by the cow in Hinduism derives from the value of cattle in Aryan pastoral society. But others have pointed out that cattle were a source of both money and food and suggest that the cow’s sacred position may have descended from the concept of the sacred bull in Harappan culture.

The concept of *karma* is governed by the *dharma*, or the law. A law regulating human behavior, the *dharma* imposes different requirements on different individuals depending on their status in society. Those high on the social scale, such as *brahmins* and *kshatriyas*, are held to a stricter form of behavior than *sudras* are. The *brahmin*, for example, is expected to abstain from eating meat, because that would entail the killing of another living being, thus interrupting its *karma*.

How the concept of reincarnation originated is not known, although it was apparently not unusual for early peoples to believe that the individual soul would be reborn in a different form in a later life. In any case, in India the concept may have had practical causes as well as consequences. In the first place, it tended to provide religious sanction for the rigid class divisions that had begun to emerge in Indian society after the arrival of the Aryans, while at the same time providing certain compensations for those lower on the ladder of life. For example, it gave hope to the poor that if they behaved properly in this life, they might improve their condition in the next. It also provided a means for unassimilated groups such as ethnic minorities to find a place in Indian society while at the same time permitting them to maintain their distinctive way of life. The ultimate goal of achieving “good” *karma*, for all believers, was to escape the cycle of existence. To the sophisticated, the nature of that release was a spiritual union of the individual soul with the Great World Soul, *Brahman*, described in the

Upanishads as a form of dreamless sleep, free from earthly desires.

What about the religious beliefs of the vast majority of the Indian people during this formative stage in South Asian society? In all likelihood, popular religion during the first millennium BCE broadly resembled that of peoples elsewhere throughout the world at the time. Belief in the existence of spirits related to natural events, such as thunder or rainfall, or to natural objects such as mountains or trees, was probably commonplace. By the end of the first millennium BCE, a number of primary deities had begun to appear, including the so-called trinity of gods: Brahman the Creator,

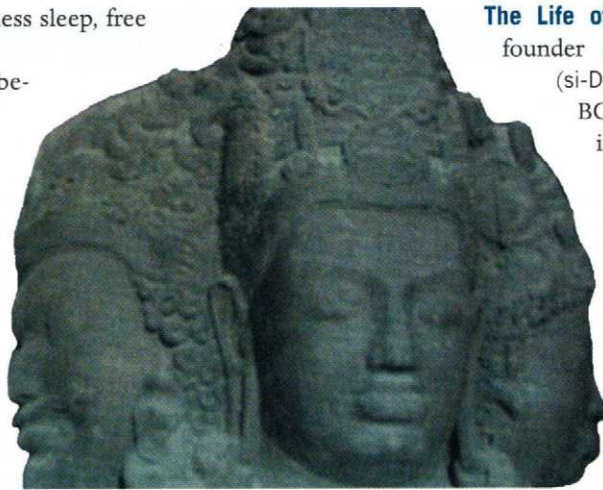
Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva (SHIV-uh) (originally the Vedic god Rudra) the Destroyer. Although Brahman (sometimes in his concrete form called Brahma) was considered to be the highest god, Vishnu and Shiva eventually began to take precedence in the devotional exercises of many Indians, who could be roughly divided into Vishnuites and Shaivites.

Over the centuries, religious practices among Aryan elites changed radically from its origins in Aryan pastoral society. The early belief in deities representing forces of nature gradually gave way to a more formalized system as described above, with a priestly class at court performing sacrifices in order to obtain heavenly favors. But during the first millennium BCE, for some people religious belief began to evolve into a more personal experience (see Opposing Viewpoints “The Search for Truth”), with an emphasis on ethics as a means of obtaining a union between the individual soul (*Atman*) and the ultimate reality (*Brahman*).

Such a concept, however, was probably too ethereal for the average Indian, who looked for a more concrete form of heavenly salvation, a place of beauty and bliss after a life of disease and privation. In later centuries, the Brahmanical beliefs and practices of early Aryan society would gradually be replaced by a more popular faith that would henceforth become known as Hinduism. We will discuss that transformation in Chapter 9.

2-3b Buddhism: The Middle Path

In the sixth century BCE, a new doctrine appeared in northern India that would eventually begin to rival the popularity of Brahmanical beliefs throughout the subcontinent. This new doctrine was called **Buddhism**.



The Three Faces of Shiva. In the first centuries CE, Hindus began to adopt Buddhist rock art. One outstanding example is at the Elephanta Caves, near the modern city of Mumbai (Bombay). Dominating the cave is this 18-foot-high triple-headed statue of Shiva, representing the Hindu deity in all his various aspects. The central figure shows him in total serenity, enveloped in absolute knowledge. The angry profile on the left portrays him as the destroyer, struggling against time, death, and other negative forces. The right-hand profile shows his loving and feminine side in the guise of his beautiful wife, Parvati. William J. Duiker

The Life of Siddhartha Gautama The historical founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama (si-DAR-tuh GAW-tuh-muh) (c. 560–480 BCE), was a native of a small kingdom in the foothills of the Himalaya Mountains in what is today southern Nepal. He was born in the mid-sixth century BCE, the son of a ruling *kshatriya* family (see Comparative Illustration “The Buddha and Jesus” on p. 62). According to tradition, the young Siddhartha was raised in affluent surroundings and trained, like many other members of his class, in the martial arts. On reaching maturity, he married and began to raise a family. At the age of twenty-nine, however, he suddenly discovered the pain of illness, the sorrow of death, and the degradation caused by old age in the lives of ordinary people and exclaimed, “Would that sickness, age, and death might be forever bound!” From that

time on, he decided to dedicate his life to determining the cause and seeking the cure for human suffering.

To find the answers to these questions, Siddhartha abandoned his home and family and traveled widely. At first he tried to follow the model of the ascetics, but he eventually decided that self-mortification did not lead to a greater understanding of life and abandoned the practice. Then one day after a lengthy period of meditation under a tree, he achieved enlightenment as to the meaning of life and spent the remainder of his life preaching it. His conclusions, as embodied in his teachings, became the philosophy (or as some would have it, the religion) of Buddhism. According to legend, the Devil (the Indian term is *Mara*) attempted desperately to tempt him with political power and the company of beautiful girls. But Siddhartha Gautama resisted:

*Pleasure is brief as a flash of lightning
Or like an autumn shower, only for a moment. . . .
Why should I then covet the pleasures you speak of?
I see your bodies are full of all impurity:
Birth and death, sickness and age are yours.
I seek the highest prize, hard to attain by men—
The true and constant wisdom of the wise.⁷*

Buddhism and Brahmanism How much the modern doctrine of Buddhism resembles the original teachings of Siddhartha Gautama is open to debate, for much time has elapsed since his death and original texts relating his ideas are lacking. Nor is it certain that Siddhartha even intended to found a new religion or doctrine. In some respects, his ideas could be viewed as a reformist form of Brahmanism, designed to transfer

The Search for Truth

Opposing Viewpoints

AT THE TIME THE RIG VEDA WAS ORIGINALLY COMPOSED IN THE SECOND MILLENNIUM BCE,

brahmins at court believed that the best way to communicate with the gods was through sacrifice, a procedure that was carried out through the intermediation of the fire god Agni. The first selection is an incantation uttered by priests at the sacrificial ceremony.

By the middle of the first millennium BCE, however, the tradition of offering sacrifices had come under attack by opponents, who argued that the best way to seek truth and tranquility was by renouncing material existence and adopting the life of a wandering mendicant. In the second selection, from the *Mundaka Upanishad*, an advocate of this position forcefully presents his views. The similarity with the fervent believers of early Christianity, who renounced the corrupting forces of everyday life by seeking refuge in isolated monasteries in the desert, is striking.

The Rig Veda

When the gods made a sacrifice

With the Man as their victim,
Spring was the melted butter, Summer the fuel,
And Autumn the oblation.

When they divided the Man,
Into how many parts did they divide him?
What was his mouth, what were his arms,
What were his thighs and his feet called?

The Brahman was his mouth,
Of his arms was made the warrior,
his thighs became the vaisya,
Of his feet the sudra was born.

The moon arose from his mind,
From his eye was born the sun,
from his mouth Indra and Agni,
from his breath the wind was born

With Sacrifice the gods sacrificed to Sacrifice -
These were the first of the sacred laws.
These mighty beings reached the sky,
Where are the eternal spirits, the gods.

The Mundaka Upanishad

Finite and transient are the fruits of sacrificial rites.

The deluded, who regard them as the highest good, remain subject to birth and death.

Living in the abyss of ignorance, the deluded think themselves blest. Attached to works, they know not God. Works lead them only to heaven, whence, to their sorrow, their rewards quickly exhausted, they are flung back to earth.

Considering religion to be observance of rituals, and performance of acts of charity, the deluded remain ignorant of the highest good. Having enjoyed in heaven the reward of their good works, they enter again into the world of mortals.

But wise, self-controlled, and tranquil souls, who are contented in spirit, and who practice austerity and meditation in solitude and silence, are freed from all impurities and attain by the path of liberation to the immortal, the truly existing, the changeless Self.

Let a man devoted to spiritual life examine carefully the ephemeral nature of such enjoyment, whether here or hereafter, as may be won by good works, and so realize that it is not by works that one gains the Eternal. Let him give no thought to transient things, but, absorbed in meditation, let him renounce the world. If he would know the Eternal, let him humbly approach a Guru devoted to Brahman and well versed in the scriptures. . . .

Q *In which passages in these two documents do you find a reference to the idea of karma? Which document makes use of the concept, and how? What role does asceticism play in these documents*

Sources: (1) *Rig Veda*, x, 90, cited in A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1954), pp. 240–241. (2) *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal*, translated by S. Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester (Hollywood, CA: The Vedanta Society of California, 1948). Published by The New American Library, Mentor, 1964, pp. 44–45.

responsibility from the priests to the individual, much as the sixteenth-century German monk Martin Luther saw his ideas as a reformation of Christianity (see Chapter 15). Siddhartha accepted much of the belief system of Brahmanism, if not all of its practices. For example, he accepted the concept of reincarnation and the role of *karma* as a means of influencing the movement of individual souls up and down the scale of life. He

praised nonviolence and borrowed the idea of living a life of simplicity and chastity from the ascetics. Moreover, his vision of metaphysical reality—commonly known as *Nirvana*—is closer to the Aryan concept of *Brahman* than it is to the Christian concept of heavenly salvation. *Nirvana*, which involves an extinction of selfhood and a final reunion with the Great World Soul, is sometimes likened to a dreamless sleep or to

HOW TO ACHIEVE ENLIGHTENMENT

Religion & Philosophy

ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS PASSAGES in Buddhist literature is the sermon at Sarnath, which

Siddhartha Gautama delivered to his followers in a deer park outside the holy city of Varanasi (Benares), in the Ganges River Valley. Here he set forth the key ideas that would define Buddhist beliefs for centuries to come. During an official visit to Sarnath nearly three centuries later, Emperor Ashoka ordered the construction of a stupa (reliquary) in honor of the Buddha's message.

The Sermon at Benares

Thus have I heard. Once the Lord was at Varanasi, at the deer park called Isipatana. There he addressed the five monks:

"There are two ends not to be served by a wanderer.

What are these two? The pursuit of desires and the pleasure which springs from desire, which is base, common, leading to rebirth, ignoble, and unprofitable; and the pursuit of pain and hardship, which is grievous, ignoble, and unprofitable.

The Middle Way of the Tathagata [the Buddha] avoids both these ends. It is enlightened, it brings clear vision, it makes for wisdom and leads to peace, insight, enlightenment, and Nirvana. What is the Middle Way? . . . It is the Noble Eightfold Path—Right Views, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. This is the Middle Way. . .

Source: Samyutta Nikaya (ed. Leon Feer and C. A. F. Rhys Davids), 6 vols. London: Oxford, 1884–1904 (Pali Text Society), p. 5.421 ff.

a kind of "blowing out" (as of a candle). Buddhists occasionally remark that someone who asks for a description does not understand the concept.

At the same time, however, the new doctrine differed from existing practices in a number of key ways. In the first place, Siddhartha denied the existence of an individual soul. To him, the concept of *Atman*—the individual soul—meant that the soul was subject to rebirth and thus did not achieve a complete liberation from the cares of this world. In fact, Siddhartha denied the ultimate reality of the material world in its entirety and taught that it was an illusion that had to be transcended. Siddhartha's idea of achieving Nirvana was based on his conviction that the pain, poverty, and sorrow that afflict human beings are caused essentially by their attachment to the things of this world. Once worldly cares are abandoned, pain and sorrow can be overcome. With this knowledge comes *bodhi*, or wisdom (source of the term *Buddhism* and the familiar name for Gautama the Wise: Gautama Buddha).

Achieving this understanding is a key step on the road to Nirvana, which, as in Brahmanism, is a form of release from the wheel of life. According to tradition, Siddhartha transmitted this message in a sermon to his disciples in a deer park at Sarnath, not far from the modern city of Varanasi (Benares). Like so many messages, it is deceptively simple and is enclosed in four noble truths: life is suffering, suffering is caused by desire, the way to end suffering is to end

"And this is the Noble Truth of Sorrow. Birth is sorrow, age is sorrow, disease is sorrow, death is sorrow; contact with the unpleasant is sorrow, separation from the pleasant is sorrow, every wish unfulfilled is sorrow—in short all the five components of individuality are sorrow.

"And this is the Noble Truth of the Arising of Sorrow. It arises from craving, which leads to rebirth, which brings delight and passion and seeks pleasure now here, now there—the craving for sensual pleasure, the craving for continued life, the craving for power.

"And this is the Noble Truth of the Stopping of Sorrow. It is the complete stopping of that craving, so that no passion remains, leaving it, being emancipated from it, being released from it, giving no place to it.

"And this is the Noble Truth of the Way which Leads to the Stopping of Sorrow. It is the Noble Eightfold Path—Right Views, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration."

Q How did Siddhartha Gautama reach the conclusion that the "four noble truths" were the proper course in living a moral life? How do his ideas compare with the commandments that God gave to the Israelites (see Chapter 1)?

desire, and the way to end desire is to avoid the extremes of a life of vulgar materialism and a life of self-torture and to follow the **Middle Path**. Also known as the Eightfold Way, the Middle Path calls for right knowledge, right purpose, right speech, right conduct, right occupation, right effort, right awareness, and right meditation (see "How to Achieve Enlightenment").

Another characteristic of Buddhism was its relative egalitarianism. Although Siddhartha accepted the idea of reincarnation (and hence the idea that human beings differ as a result of *karma* accumulated in a previous existence), he rejected the division of humanity into rigidly defined classes based on previous incarnations and taught that all human beings could aspire to Nirvana as a result of their behavior in this life—a message that likely helped Buddhism win support among people at the lower end of the social scale.

In addition, Buddhism was much simpler than existing beliefs. Siddhartha rejected the panoply of gods that had become identified with Brahmanism and forbade his followers to worship his person or his image after his death. In fact, even today many Buddhists view Buddhism as a philosophy rather than a religion.

After Siddhartha Gautama's death in about 480 BCE, dedicated disciples carried his message the length and breadth of India. Buddhist monasteries were established throughout the subcontinent, including the adjoining island of Sri Lanka, and temples and **stupas** (STOO-puhs) (stone towers intended to



William J. Duiker

Symbols of the Buddha. Early Buddhist sculptures depicted the Buddha only through visual symbols that represented his life on the path to enlightenment. In this relief from the stupa at Bharhut, carved in the second century BCE, we see four devotees paying homage to the Buddha, who is portrayed as a giant wheel dispensing his “wheel of the law.” The riderless horse on the left represents Siddhartha Gautama’s departure from his father’s home as he set out on his search for the meaning of life.

house relics of the Buddha) sprang up throughout the countryside.

Women were permitted to join the monastic order but only in an inferior position. As Siddhartha had explained, women are “soon angered,” “full of passion,” and “stupid”: “That is the reason . . . why women have no place in public assemblies . . . and do not earn their living by any profession.” Still, the position of women tended to be better in Buddhist societies than it was elsewhere in ancient India.

Jainism During the next centuries, Buddhism began to compete actively with the existing Aryan beliefs, as well as with another new faith known as Jainism. **Jainism** (JY-ni-zuhm) was founded by Mahavira (mah-hah-VEE-ruh), a contemporary of Siddhartha Gautama. Resembling Buddhism in its rejection

of the reality of the material world, Jainism was more extreme in practice. Where Siddhartha Gautama called for the “middle way” between passion and luxury on one extreme and pain and self-torture on the other, Mahavira preached a doctrine of extreme simplicity to his followers, who kept no possessions and relied on begging for a living. Some even rejected clothing and wandered through the world naked. Perhaps because of its insistence on a life of poverty, Jainism failed to attract enough adherents to become a major doctrine and never received official support. According to tradition, however, Chandragupta Maurya accepted Mahavira’s doctrine after abdicating the throne and fasted to death in a Jain monastery.

Ashoka, a Buddhist Monarch

Buddhism received an important boost when Ashoka (uh-SHOH-kuh), the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya, converted to Buddhism in the third century BCE. Ashoka



William J. Duiker

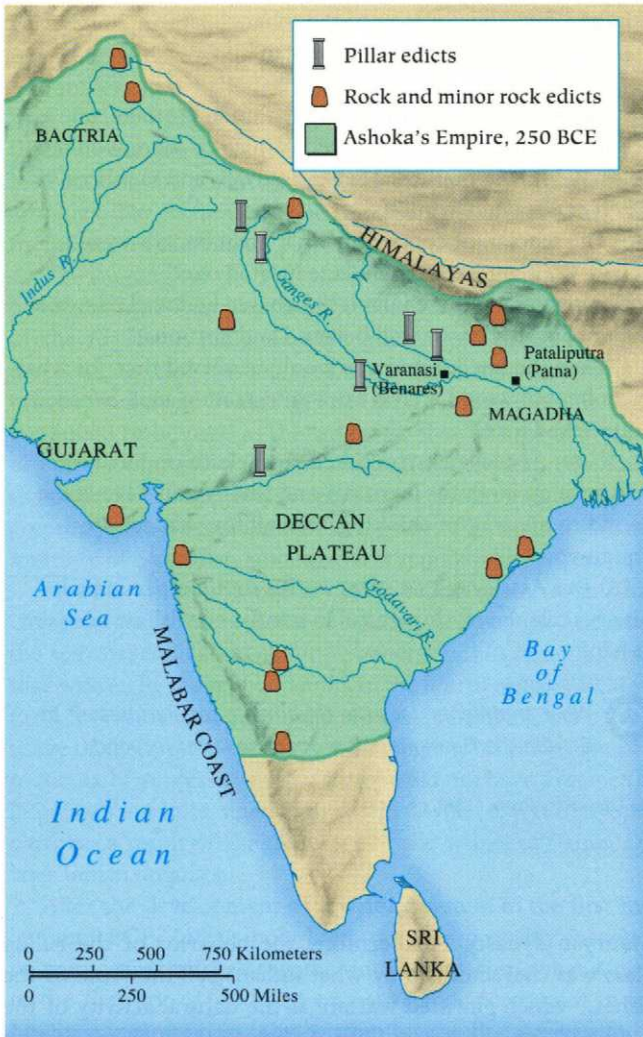
The Stupa at Sarnath. After Emperor Ashoka became converted to Buddhism, he ordered the erection of a stupa at Sarnath in honor of the location of Siddhartha’s famous sermon on how to achieve enlightenment to his followers. Simple in its design, the stupa at Sarnath is considered a prototype of many other such structures located throughout the world.

(r. 269–232 BCE) is widely considered the greatest ruler in the history of India. By his own admission, as noted in rock edicts placed around his kingdom, Ashoka began his reign conquering, pillaging, and killing, but after his conversion to Buddhism, he began to regret his bloodthirsty past and attempted to rule benevolently.

Ashoka directed that banyan trees and shelters be placed along the road to provide shade and rest for weary travelers. He sent Buddhist missionaries throughout India and ordered the erection of stone pillars with official edicts and Buddhist inscriptions to instruct people in the proper way (see Map 2.3 and the illustration “The Lions of Sarnath”). In time, much of the population living under Mauryan rule may have converted to Buddhism (see “A Singular Debate” on p. 58). According to tradition, his son converted the island of Sri Lanka to Buddhism,

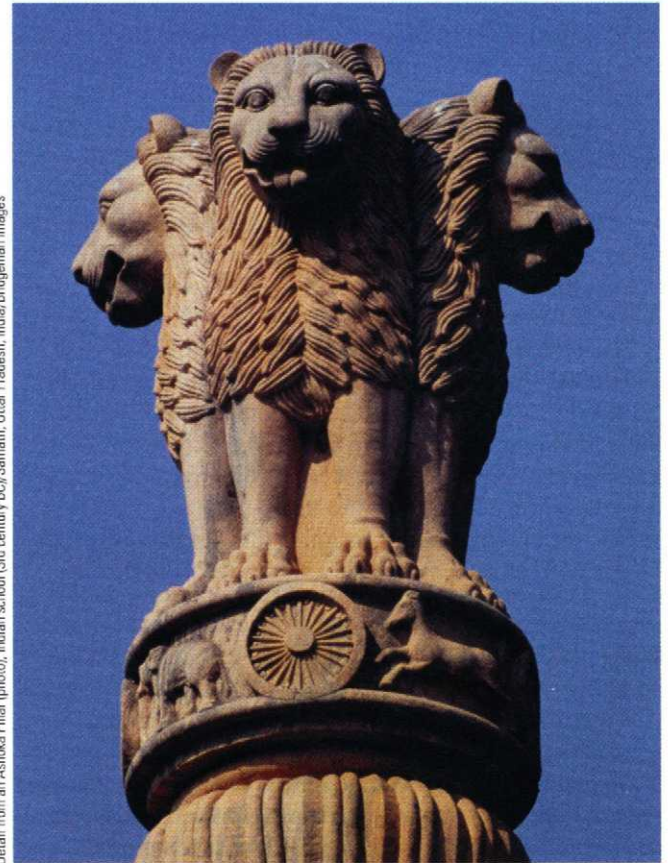
and the peoples there accepted a tributary relationship with the Mauryan Empire.

After Ashoka: The Rule of the Fishes After Ashoka’s death in 232 BCE, the Mauryan Empire began to decline. In 183 BCE, the last Mauryan ruler was overthrown by one of his military commanders, and India began to fragment into separate states. A number of new kingdoms, some of them perhaps influenced by the memory of the Alexandrian conquests, arose along the fringes of the subcontinent in Bactria, known today as Afghanistan. In the first century CE, Indo-European-speaking peoples fleeing from the nomadic Xiongnu (SHYAHNG-noo) warriors in Central Asia seized power in the area and proclaimed the new Kushan (koo-SHAHN) kingdom (see Chapter 9). For the next two centuries, the Kushans extended their political sway over northern India as far as the central Ganges Valley, while other kingdoms scuffled for predominance elsewhere on the subcontinent. India would not see unity again for another five hundred years.



Map 2.3 The Empire of Ashoka. Ashoka, the greatest Indian monarch, ruled over much of the subcontinent in the third century BCE. This map shows the extent of his empire and the locations of the pillar edicts that were erected along major trade routes.

Q Why do you think the pillars and rocks were placed where they were?



Detail from an Ashoka Pillar (photo), Indian school (3rd century BCE)/Samath, Uttar Pradesh, India/Bridgeman Images

The Lions of Sarnath. Their beauty and Buddhist symbolism make the Lions of Sarnath the most famous of the capitals topping Ashoka’s pillars. Sarnath was the holy site where the Buddha first preached, and these roaring lions echo the proclamation of Buddhist teachings to the four corners of the world. The wheel not only represents the Buddha’s laws but also proclaims Ashoka’s imperial legitimacy as the enlightened Indian ruler.

ONE OF THE KEY POINTS OF CONTENTION between advocates of Brahmanism and Buddhism was the belief on the part of the former that members of the highest social class—the Brahmins—were purer than those lower on the social scale, based on their past actions (*karma*). Siddhartha Gautama, however, had argued that all humans were inherently equal at birth and could obtain Nirvana—the state of release from earthly cares—as a consequence of their behavior in this life.

In this passage from the *Tripitaka* (Three Baskets), a collection of Buddhist writings collated by Theravada Buddhists on the island of Sri Lanka, Siddhartha Gautama confronts a devotee of Brahmanism and demonstrates the superiority of Buddhist teachings. Whether the debate actually took place is unlikely, and the date of the passage is uncertain, but it effectively singles out one of the key points of difference between the two teachings.

The Tripitaka

Once when the Lord was staying at Savatthi there were five hundred brahmins from various countries in the city . . . and they thought: “This ascetic Gautama preaches that all four classes are pure. Who can refute him?”

At that time there was a young brahman named Assalayana in the city, . . . a youth of sixteen, thoroughly versed in the Vedas . . . and in all brahmanic learning. “He can do it!” thought the brahmins, and so they asked him to try; . . . he agreed, and so, surrounded by a crowd of brahmins, he went to the Lord, and, after greeting him, sat down and said:

“Brahmins maintain that only they are the highest class, and the others are below them. They are white, the others black; only they are pure, and not the others. Only they are the true sons of Brahma, born from his mouth, born of Brahma, creations of Brahma, heirs of Brahma. Now what does the worthy Gautama say to that?”

“Do the brahmins really maintain this, Assalayana, when they’re born of women just like anyone else, of brahman

women who have their periods and conceive, give birth and nurse their children, just like any other women?”

“For all you say, this is what they think. . . .”

. . .

“Again if a man is a murderer, a thief, or an adulterer, or commits other grave sins, when his body breaks up on death does he pass on to purgatory if he’s a kshatriya, vaishya, or shudra, but not if he’s a brahman?”

“No, Gautama. In such a case, the same fate is in store for all men, whatever their class.”

. . .

“And is a brahman capable of developing a mind of love without hate or ill will, but not a man of the other classes?”

“No, Gautama. All four classes are capable of doing so.”

“Can only a brahman go down to a river and wash away dust and dirt, and not men of the other classes?”

“No, Gautama. All four classes can.”

. . .

“Suppose there are two young brahman brothers, one a scholar and the other uneducated. Which of them would be served first at memorial feasts, festivals, and sacrifices, or when entertained as guests?”

“The scholar, of course; for what great benefit would accrue from entertaining the uneducated one?”

“But suppose the scholar is ill-behaved and wicked, while the uneducated one is well-behaved and virtuous?”

“Then the uneducated one would be served first, for what great benefit would accrue from entertaining an ill-behaved and wicked man?”

“First, Assalayana, you based your claim on birth, then you gave up birth for learning, and finally you have come round to my way of thinking, that all four classes are equally pure!”

At this Assalayana sat silent . . . his shoulders hunched, his eyes cast down, thoughtful in mind, and with no answer at hand.



What arguments does the Brahmanic scholar present to Siddhartha Gautama? How does the latter respond?

Source: Ainslee T. Embree (ed.), *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. I (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 140–141.

Several reasons for India’s failure to maintain a unified empire have been proposed. Some historians suggest that a decline in regional trade during the first millennium CE may have contributed to the growth of small land-based kingdoms, which drew their primary income from agriculture. The tenacity of the Aryan tradition, with its emphasis on tribal rivalries, may also have contributed. Although the Mauryan rulers tried to impose a more centralized organization, clan loyalties once again came to the fore after the collapse of the

Mauryan dynasty. Furthermore, the behavior of the ruling class was characterized by what Indians call the “rule of the fishes,” which glorified warfare as the natural activity of the king and the aristocracy. The *Arthashastra*, which set forth a model of a centralized Indian state, assumed that war was the “sport of kings.” Still, this was not an uneventful period in the history of India, as Indo-Aryan ideas continued to spread southward and both Brahmanism and Buddhism evolved in new directions.

2-4 THE EXUBERANT WORLD OF INDIAN CULTURE



Focus Question: In what ways did the culture of ancient India resemble and differ from the cultural experience of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt?

Few cultures in the world are as rich and varied as that of India. Most societies excel in some forms of artistic and literary achievement and not in others, but India has produced great works in almost all fields of cultural endeavor—art and sculpture, science, architecture, literature, and music.

2-4a Literature

The earliest known Indian literature consists of the four Vedas, which were passed down orally from generation to generation until they were finally written down after the Aryans arrived in India. The Rig Veda dates from the second millennium BCE and consists of more than a thousand hymns that were used at religious ceremonies. The other three Vedas were written considerably later and contain instructions for performing ritual sacrifices and other ceremonies. The Brahmanas and the Upanishads served as commentaries on the Vedas.

The language of the Vedas was **Sanskrit** (SAN-skrit), a member of the Indo-European family of languages. After the arrival of the Aryans in India, Sanskrit gradually declined as a spoken language and was replaced in northern India by a simpler tongue known as **Prakrit** (PRAH-krit). Nevertheless, Sanskrit continued to be used as the language of the bureaucracy and of literary expression for many centuries after that. Like Latin in medieval Europe, it also served as a common language of communication between various regions of India. In the south, a variety of Dravidian languages continued to be spoken.

As early as the fifth century BCE, Indian grammarians had codified Sanskrit to preserve the authenticity of the Vedas for the spiritual edification of future generations. A famous grammar written by the scholar Panini in the fourth century BCE set forth four thousand grammatical rules prescribing the correct usage of the spoken and written language. This achievement is particularly impressive in that Europe did not have a science of linguistics until the nineteenth century, when it was developed partly as a result of the discovery of the works of Panini and later Indian linguists.

After the development of a writing system in the first millennium BCE, India's holy literature was probably inscribed on palm leaves stitched together into a book somewhat similar to the first books produced on papyrus or parchment in the Mediterranean region. Also written for the first time were India's great historical epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana (rah-mah-YAH-nah). Both of these epics may have originally been recited at religious ceremonies, but they are essentially histories that recount the martial exploits of great Aryan rulers and warriors.

The Mahabharata, consisting of more than 90,000 stanzas, was probably written about 100 BCE and describes in great detail a war between cousins for control of the kingdom nine hundred years earlier. Interwoven in the narrative are many fantastic legends of the gods. Above all, the Mahabharata is a tale of moral confrontations and an elucidation of the ethical precepts of the *dharma*. The most famous section of the book is the so-called Bhagavad Gita, a sermon by the legendary Indian figure Krishna on the eve of a major battle. In this sermon, given in the form of advice to a colleague, Krishna sets forth one of the key ethical maxims of Indian society: in taking action, one must be indifferent to success or failure and consider only the moral rightness of the act itself.

The Ramayana, written at about the same time, is much shorter than the Mahabharata. It is an account of a semi-legendary ruler named Rama (RAH-mah) who, as a result of a palace intrigue, is banished from the kingdom and forced to live as a hermit in the forest. Later he fights the demon-king of Sri Lanka, who has kidnapped his beloved wife, Sita (SEE-tuh). Like the Mahabharata, the Ramayana is strongly imbued with religious and moral significance. Rama is portrayed as the ideal Aryan hero, a perfect ruler and an ideal son, while Sita projects the supreme duty of female chastity and wifely loyalty to her husband. The Ramayana is a story of the triumph of good over evil, duty over self-indulgence, and generosity over selfishness. It combines filial and erotic love, conflicts of human passion, character analysis, and poetic descriptions of nature (see "Rama and Sita" on p. 60).

The Ramayana also has all the ingredients of an enthralling adventure: giants, wondrous flying chariots, invincible arrows and swords, and magic potions and mantras. One of the real heroes of the story is the monkey-king Hanuman, who flies from India to Sri Lanka to set the great battle in motion. It is no wonder that for millennia the Ramayana has remained a favorite among Indians of all age groups, often performed at festivals today and inspiring a hugely popular TV version produced in recent years.

2-4b Architecture and Sculpture

After literature, the greatest achievements of early Indian civilization were in architecture and sculpture. Some of the earliest examples of Indian architecture stem from the time of Emperor Ashoka, when Buddhism became the religion of the state. Until the time of the Mauryas, Aryan buildings had been constructed of wood. With the rise of the empire, stone began to be used, as artisans arrived in India seeking employment after the destruction of the Persian Empire by Alexander. Many of these stone carvers accepted the patronage of Emperor Ashoka, who used them to spread Buddhist ideas throughout the subcontinent.

There were three main types of religious structures: the pillar, the stupa, and the rock chamber. As noted earlier, during Ashoka's reign, many stone columns were erected alongside roads to commemorate the events in the Buddha's life and mark

OVER THE AGES, THE CONCLUSION OF THE INDIAN EPIC known as the Ramayana has been the focus of considerable debate. After a long period of

captivity at the hands of the demon Ravana, Sita is finally liberated by her husband, King Rama. Although the two have a joyful reunion, the people of Rama's kingdom voice suspicions that she has been defiled by her captor, and Rama is forced to banish her to a forest, where she gives birth to twin sons. The account reflects the belief, expressed in the *Arthashastra*, that a king must place the needs of his subjects over his personal desires. Here we read of Rama's anguished decision as he consults with his brother, Lakshmana.

By accepting banishment, Sita bows to the authority of her husband and the established moral order. Subservient and long-suffering, she has been lauded as the ideal heroine and feminine role model, imitated by generations of Indian women. At the close of the Ramayana, Rama decides to take Sita back "before all my people." She continues to feel humiliated, however, and begs Mother Earth to open up and swallow her.

The Ramayana

"A king must be blameless."

"Such words pierce my heart," said Lakshmana. "Fire himself proved her innocent. She is fired gold, poured into golden fire!"

Rama said, "Lakshmana, consider what is a king. Kings cannot afford blame. Ill fame is evil to kings; they above all men must be beyond reproach. . . . See into what a chasm of sorrow a King may fall. . . ."

Lakshmana said, "Gradually everything seems to change again, and even an Emperor must pay his way through life."

Rama faced his brother. "It must be! It's all the same, can't you see? Where there is growth there is decay; where there is prosperity there is ruin; and where there is birth there is death."

Lakshmana sighed hopelessly. "Well, what will you do?"

"Sita expects to go to the forests tomorrow. Let Sumantra the Charioteer drive you both there, and when you arrive by the river Ganga abandon her."

"She will die. Your child will die!"

"No," said Rama. "I command you! Not a word to anyone."

Source: From *The Ramayana* by R. K. Narayan. Viking Books, 1972.

pilgrim routes to holy places. Weighing up to 50 tons each and rising as high as 32 feet, these polished sandstone pillars were topped with a carved capital, usually depicting lions uttering the Buddha's message. Ten remain standing today (a photograph of one of these pillars appears in the Comparative Illustration "The Stele," Section 8-5c, p. 236).

Lakshmana said, "Surely a king is remote and lonely, and very far from reason. We cannot speak to you. . . ."

Rama said, "Each person can be told what he will understand of the nature of the world, and no more than that—for the rest, take my word. . . ."

Sita was forever beautiful. Wearing her ornaments she turned slowly around and looked at every person there. "Rama, let me prove my innocence, here before everyone."

"I give my permission," said Rama.

Then Sita stepped a little away from him and said, "Mother Earth, if I have been faithful to Rama take me home, hide me!"

Earth rolled and moved beneath our feet. With a great rumbling noise the ground broke apart near Sita and a deep chasm opened, lighted from below with bright lights like lightning flashes, from the castles of the Naga serpent kings. . . .

On that throne sat Mother Earth. Earth was not old, she was fair to look on, she was not sad but smiling. She wore flowers and a girdle of seas. Earth supports all life, but she feels no burden in all that. She is patient. She was patient then, under the Sun and Moon and through the rainfalls of countless years. She was patient with seasons and with kings and farmers; she endured all things and bore no line of care from it.

But this was the end of her long patience with Rama. Earth looked at her husband Janaka and smiled. Then she stretched out her arms and took her only child Sita on her lap. She folded her beautiful arms around her daughter and laid Sita's head softly against her shoulder as a mother would. Earth stroked her hair with her fair hands, and Sita closed her eyes like a little girl.

The throne sank back underground and they all were gone; the Nagas dove beneath the ground and the crevice closed gently over them, forever.



How does this story reflect some of the basic values of traditional Indian civilization? Why do you think it was necessary for the story to have an unhappy ending, unlike Homer's epic *The Odyssey*, which ends with the return of the hero Odysseus to his wife, Penelope, after many arduous travels?

A stupa was originally meant to house a relic of the Buddha, such as a lock of his hair or a branch of the famous Bodhi tree (the tree beneath which Siddhartha Gautama had first achieved enlightenment), and was constructed in the form of a burial mound (the pyramids in Egypt also derived from burial mounds). Eventually, the stupa became a place for devotion and



Hitelezu Nishibata/SuperStock

Sanchi Gate and Stupa. Constructed during the reign of Emperor Ashoka in the third century BCE, the stupa at Sanchi was enlarged over time, eventually becoming the greatest Buddhist monument on the Indian subcontinent. Originally intended to house a relic of the Buddha, the stupa became a holy place for devotion and a familiar form of Buddhist architecture. Sanchi's four elaborately carved stone gates, each more than 40 feet high, tell stories of the Buddha set in joyful scenes of everyday life. Christian churches would later similarly portray events in the life of Jesus to instruct the faithful.

the most familiar form of Buddhist architecture. Stupas rose to considerable heights and were surmounted with a spire, possibly representing the stages of existence en route to Nirvana. According to legend, Ashoka ordered the construction of 84,000

stupas throughout India to promote the Buddha's message. A few survive today, including the one at Sarnath (see the illustration "The Stupa at Sarnath" on p. 56) and its more elaborate prototype at Sanchi, begun under Ashoka and completed two centuries later.



Yvonne V. Duiker

A Carved Chapel. Carved out of solid rock cliffs during the Mauryan dynasty, rock chambers served as meditation halls for traveling Buddhist monks. Initially, they resembled freestanding shrines of wood and thatch from the Vedic period but evolved into magnificent chapels carved deep into the mountainside, such as the chapel at Ajanta shown here. The first caves were dug out at Ajanta during the reign of Ashoka, and a monastery for Buddhist monks was established there by about 200 BCE. Working downward from the top, stonecutters removed tons of rock, and sculptors embellished and polished the interior. Notice the rounded vault and multicolumned sides reminiscent of Roman basilicas in the West.

The final form of early Indian architecture is the rock chamber carved out of a cliff on the side of a mountain. Ashoka began the construction of these chambers to provide rooms to house monks or wandering ascetics and to serve as halls for religious ceremonies. The chambers were rectangular, with pillars, an altar, and a vault, reminiscent of Roman basilicas in the West. The three most famous chambers of this period are at Bhaja, Karli, and Ajanta (uh-JUHN-tuh); the last one contains twenty-nine rooms.

All three forms of architecture were embellished with detailed reliefs and freestanding statues of deities, other human figures, and animals that are permeated with a sense of nature and the vitality of life. Many reflect an amalgamation of popular and sacred themes, of Buddhist, Vedic, and pre-Aryan religious motifs, such as male and female earth spirits. Until the second century CE, Siddhartha Gautama was represented only through symbols, such as the wheel of life, the Bodhi tree, and the footprint, perhaps because artists deemed it improper to portray him in human form, since he had escaped his corporeal confines into enlightenment. After the spread of Mahayana Buddhism in the second century, when the Buddha was no longer portrayed as a teacher but rather as a god, his image began to appear in stone as an object for divine worship (see Comparative Illustration "The Buddha and Jesus" on p. 62).

COMPARATIVE ILLUSTRATION

Religion & Philosophy

The Buddha and Jesus. As Buddhism evolved, transforming Siddhartha Gautama, known as the *Buddha*, from mortal to god, Buddhist art changed as well. Statuary and relief panels began to illustrate the story of his life. In A, a frieze from the second century CE, the infant Siddhartha is seen emerging from the hip of his mother, Queen Maya. Although dressed in draperies that reflect Greek influences from Alexander the Great's brief incursion into northwestern India, her sensuous stance and the touching of the tree evoke the female earth spirit of traditional Indian art. In B is a Byzantine painting

depicting the infant Jesus with his mother, the Virgin Mary, dating from the sixth century CE. Notice that a halo surrounds the head of both the Buddha and Jesus. The halo—a circle of light—is an ancient symbol of divinity. In Hindu, Greek, and Roman art, the heads of gods were depicted emitting sunlike divine radiances. Early kings adopted crowns made of gold and precious gems to symbolize their own divine authority.

Q What similarities and differences do you see in these depictions of the mothers of key religious figures?

A



William J. Duiker

B



Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

By this time, India had established its own unique religious art. The art is permeated by sensuousness and exuberance and is often overtly sexual. These scenes are meant to express otherworldly delights, not the pleasures of this world. The sensuous paradise that adorned the religious art of ancient India represented salvation and fulfillment for the ordinary Indian.

2-4c Science

Our knowledge of Indian science is limited by the paucity of written sources, but it is evident that ancient Indians had amassed an impressive amount of scientific knowledge in a

number of areas. Especially notable was their work in mathematics, where they devised the numerical system that we know as Arabic numbers and use today, and in astronomy, where they charted the movements of the heavenly bodies and recognized the spherical nature of the earth at an early date. Their ideas of physics were similar to those of the Greeks; matter was divided into the five elements of earth, air, fire, water, and ether. Many of their technological achievements are impressive, notably the quality of their textiles and the massive stone pillars erected during the reign of Ashoka. As noted, the pillars weighed up to 50 tons each and were transported many miles to their final destination.

CHAPTER SUMMARY



While the peoples of North Africa and the Middle East were actively building the first civilizations, a similar process was getting under way in the Indus River Valley. Much has been learned about the nature of the Indus Valley civilization in recent years, but the lack of written records limits our understanding. How did the Indus Valley people deal with the fundamental human problems mentioned at the close of Chapter 1? The answers remain tantalizingly elusive.

As often happened elsewhere, however, the collapse of Indus Valley civilization did not lead to the total disappearance of its culture. The new society that eventually emerged throughout the subcontinent after the coming of the Aryans was an amalgam of two highly distinctive cultures, each of which made a significant contribution to the politics, social

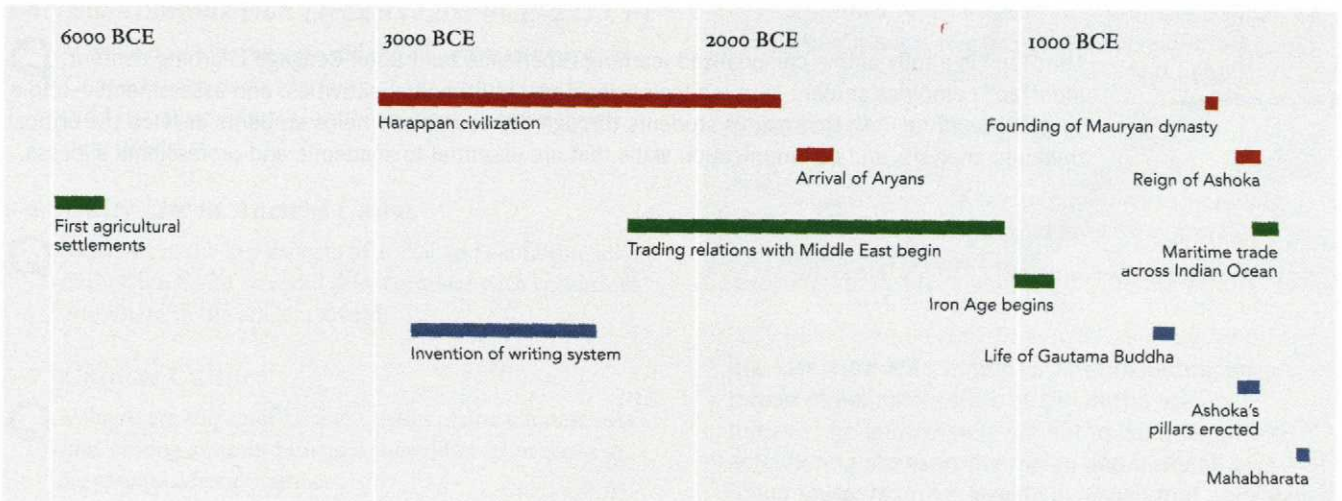
institutions, and creative impulse of ancient Indian civilization.

With the rise of the Mauryan dynasty in the fourth century BCE, the distinctive features of a great civilization begin to be clearly visible. It was extensive in its scope, embracing the entire Indian subcontinent and eventually, in the form of Buddhism and Hinduism, spreading to China and Southeast Asia. But the underlying ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity of the Indian people posed a constant challenge to the unity of the state. After the collapse of the Mauryas, the subcontinent would not come under a single authority again for several hundred years.

In the meantime, another great experiment was taking place far to the northeast, across the Himalaya Mountains. Like many other civilizations of antiquity, the first Chinese state was concentrated on a major river system. And like them, too, its political and cultural achievements eventually spread far beyond their original habitat. In the next chapter, we turn to the civilization of ancient China.



CHAPTER TIMELINE



CHAPTER REVIEW

Upon Reflection

- Q What is the debate over the origins of the Aryan peoples, and why do many historians of India consider it to be such an important question?
- Q Why was Buddhism able to make such inroads among the Indian people at a time when Brahmanical beliefs had long been dominant in the subcontinent?

Key Terms

raja (p. 44)
kshatriya (p. 44)
maharajas (p. 44)
dharma (p. 45)
varna (p. 46)
brahmins (p. 46)
Brahman (p. 46)
vaisya (p. 47)
twice-born (p. 47)
sudras (p. 47)
pariahs (p. 47)
jati (p. 48)
guru (p. 48)

- Q What were some of the main characteristics of Indian politics and government during the first millennium BCE, and how can they be compared and contrasted with those of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia?

sati (p. 48)
Brahmanism (p. 51)
reincarnation (p. 52)
karma (p. 52)
Atman (p. 53)
Buddhism (p. 53)
Nirvana (p. 54)
bodhi (p. 55)
Middle Path (p. 55)
stupas (p. 55)
Jainism (p. 56)
Sanskrit (p. 59)
Prakrit (p. 59)

Chapter Notes

1. Quoted in R. Lannoy, *The Speaking Tree: A Study of Indian Culture and Society* (London, 1971), p. 318.
2. The quotation is from *ibid.*, p. 319. Note also that the *Law of Manu* says that “punishment alone governs all created beings. . . . The whole world is kept in order by punishment, for a guiltless man is hard to find.”
3. Strabo’s *Geography*, bk. 15, quoted in M. Edwardes, *A History of India: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London, 1961), p. 55.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
6. From the *Law of Manu*, quoted in A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (London, 1961), pp. 180–181. © 1961 Pan Macmillan, London.
7. Quoted in A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism* (New York, 1964), p. 34.



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